

TM

INFERNO!

EYE OF
TERROR
OFFICIAL PRODUCT



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Tales of Fantasy & Adventure

INFERNO!

THE HOUR of Chaos is upon us. The Eye of Terror has opened and the Imperium of man teeters on the brink. Abaddon the Despoiler has returned and his forces are once more abroad, rampaging and plundering through the Cadian sub sector. The thirteenth Black Crusade has begun!

This summer heralds the latest Games Workshop worldwide campaign pitting the loyal forces of the Emperor against the warp-born hordes of Chaos and the Black Library are proud to announce that we too are getting involved in this struggle that could alter the face of the Warhammer 40,000 universe for many years to come.

You should have already noticed the 'Eye of Terror Official Product' icon on the front cover. No? Go back and have a look, it's just above the Nurgle Marine's left (from your point of view) shoulder. Any product bearing that icon ties the campaign in some way, be it rules, figures, fiction or comics – some of which actually expand on the campaign narrative, others which focus on the background and the historical events

leading up to the thirteenth crusade.

In this issue of *Inferno!*, our lead story is by none other than Andy Hoare, a name a lot of you Warhammer 40,000 players should instantly recognise by virtue of Andy being part of the development team for that particular game.

Not only is it Andy's first work to make it into these hallowed pages – his second can be found on the two pages following his first – but it is also the first story to tie into the Eye of Terror campaign and introduces some very dangerous players in the forthcoming war against Abaddon.

I'm not going to spoil it for you by revealing exactly who they are so you lot are just going to have to turn to page four and start reading it for yourselves.

HERE'S MORE Eye of Terror action in the next issue of *Inferno!* but for those of you who can't wait there's always the Eye of Terror comic strip, *Last Stand on Yavor*, that's currently running in *Warhammer Monthly*.

This strip is really exciting for many reasons: not only is it being brought to you

by the top-notch creative team of Gordon 'Bloodquest' Rennie and Karl 'Lone Wolves' Richardson and features the Doom Eagles making a desperate stand against a host of plague zombies, but it's also down to you, the reader, to decide the outcome of the story.

Thanks to the magic of the internet, at the end of the second episode we'll be printing a web address for you to log onto and register your vote for how you think the story should conclude. Gordon has already delivered three different plots: one for if you vote for an Imperium win, one for if you vote for a Chaos win and one for if it's too close to call and the battle ends in a stalemate.

Better still, these votes actually count towards the final campaign conclusion so not only will you decide the fate of a single planet but also help shape the future of an entire universe. Check it out!



Christian Dunn

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HUNTER / PREY

By ANDY HOARE

GASPING FOR breath in the darkness, Neme Fortuna stifled a scream.

She felt the beast lunge towards her scant moments before its tremendous weight barrelled into her chest, its claws gripping her wrists and slicing into the flesh as she was slammed into the flagstone paving.

The beast's snarling face was right in her own, its animal breath huffing against her skin, saliva specking her cheek. It wore dull, grey armour, and a glint of light reflected in huge canine teeth as it opened its mouth to roar. She screamed in denial, the beast bellowed in fury, and for an instant her eyes locked with the two dark pits mere centimetres from her face, tiny, malevolent sparks of animal rage glowing crimson in the darkness before her.

She thrashed and wrestled and screamed, but the beast's claws sank into the raw flesh of her wrists, blood seeping through her sleeves and turning the stones beneath slick.

The beast reared, and Neme Fortuna knew with a stark clarity that the events of the previous twenty-four hours would lead to her death, here in the dark, on a cold stone floor on an Emperor-forsaken wasteland at the edge of hell.

Neme sat cross-legged and still before the censer, her shaven head lowered as she breathed the ritual incantations that would allow her to enter a state of meditation in which she could send her consciousness beyond the confines of her physical body. She breathed deeply, feeling the hot smoke fill her lungs. After a moment of warm light-headedness she began to perceive the room around her, to sense its dimensions and textures despite the fact that her eyes were closed in deep concentration.

Reaching beyond the boundaries of her chamber, the psyker allowed her spirit-self to drift on the zephyrs of consciousness gusting around the station. Down cramped, darkened corridors, hooded tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus and shuffling acolytes of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica passed. She could sense their unease, for she felt it too, a tangible miasma permeating the very air, circulated by the millennia-old atmosphere conditioners. On instinct, she allowed her spirit-self to coast on the emotional slipstream of a trooper as he marched purposely towards the control centre of the Ormantep Listening Station.

The trooper, a member of the elite Karskin company that had been dispatched from Cadia to garrison the post, swung open the heavy blast door of the control centre and stepped into a scene of barely controlled mayhem. Tech-priests and acolytes crowded around cogitators and pict slates, some issuing orders, others hurrying to carry them out. Some debated with fellows while others raised voices in denial. Still more knelt in prayer to the God-Emperor of Mankind, while others sat with head in hands.

INCENSE DRIFTED upwards in a lazy spiral from the ornate censer set on the floor, its cloying scent permeating the room and turning the light from the dim glow globe a cold blue.

Into this scene Neme followed the trooper, who strode calmly amidst the turmoil to stand at attention before a man who was clearly his superior. The trooper saluted, handed the officer a data-slate, and was dismissed.

The officer surveyed the room, his rugged, noble features showing barely contained disdain at the lack of discipline surrounding him. He lifted the slate, his piercing eyes speed-reading the information displayed on its glowing pict screen. He turned, issuing an order to an acolyte, though Neme's spirit-self could make out no more than a ghostly echo as he spoke.

The acolyte hurried to a cogitator bank, his hands speeding over the dials and levers. A massive display at the centre of the chamber came to life, grainy static splashed across its surface. The image resolved into a view of the barren oxide wastes of Ormantep: low, jagged hills serrated the horizon. The officer barked an order, and the acolyte adjusted the controls. A crosshair appeared in the centre of the screen, and the scene zoomed in on a patch of sky, a numeric counter set in the corner of the target icon counting up the magnification.

Even at maximum zoom the picture was barely discernable, yet Neme could make out a trio of white contrails streaking across the night sky towards the distant mountains.

She concentrated, allowing her spirit to lift. Up through the vaulted ceiling of the control chamber, through dark access ways and service ducts, through plates of armplas sheathing and out into the night. The domed form of the control centre squatted on the barren surface below, secondary structures adjoining it at seemingly random points. She drifted higher, imagining herself buffeted by high altitude winds that her spirit-self had no way of perceiving. Turning her sight on the distant horizon, she sped in the direction she had been shown by the pict.

Several kilometres out into the oxide wastes, Neme caught sight of the steaks of fire slashing across the dark sky. The three lights passed across the livid purple stain that was the distant, though still too-close

edge of the Ocularis Terribus, the Eye of Terror, the cosmic-scale rent in the fabric of reality through which the most dreaded of humanity's foes had fled ten thousand years before, and through which no sane man should pass. Steeling herself, Neme sped on, until she saw a distant cloud billow up from the base of an ancient crater.

In her chamber, Neme Fortuna gasped as her spirit-self returned to her body. She bent double, dry retching as a wave of nausea hit. She had seen them. Massively armoured warriors in black and gold, disembarking from dread engines of daemon-spawned technology.

Intruders had made planetfall on Ormantep.



IS THERE ANY danger of you actually finishing today, deacon?

'Just gimme a sec, will ya? I'm almost done.'

'Shift ended ten minutes ago. Get a move on or we're off without ya.'

Guido Sol hefted the power pack of his drill rig as he exited the mine-shaft. His bulky pressure suit was encrusted with the dust and grime of another fruitless, ten-hour shift at the face. Deacon, his partner in this fool's errand of a contract, emerged a moment later, gloved hand raised to shield his visored face from the glare of the warp-spawned energies of the Ocularis raging in the night sky above.

While Deacon struggled with his power packs and feed-lines, Sol strode over to the ledge of the cliff into which the mine was sunk. The desolate plains stretched for miles below him, the rust-coloured deposits of eons tinged a sickly violet by the glow of the Eye of Terror. A low wind swept across the barrens, stirring eddies of dust that skimmed off towards the distant horizon.

'I hate this place.'

Sol and his crew were indentured workers, miners shipped in from off-world to work the mines of Ormantep for what

had seemed, at the time they had signed up, a tidy profit. But on their arrival they had found themselves indebted to their Adeptus Mechanicus employers for the cost of the interstellar journey, and that cost had amounted to the equivalent of a lifetime in service to the Adeptus overseers.

Finally, Deacon was ready, and Sol set off towards their crawler where the rest of the miners waited. But the other man had stopped again, and was staring up into the sky, his squinting eyes visible through the plastic shield of his pressure hood.

'For the Emperor's mercy, what now?'

Deacon pointed, and Sol turned. As he did so a superheated mass of screaming metal thundered overhead, throwing both men to the ground with the force of its backwash. Sol felt the rubber of his pressure suit melting into his back and he fought to remain conscious as the mountainside was churned with dust and flying rock.

Sol raised his head, his ears ringing with the force of the object's passage. As the tumult of its passing settled, he could make out the form of his companion rising from the ground and dusting himself off. Standing up, he was afforded a view of a blossoming mushroom cloud at the base of an unnamed crater, not half a kilometre distant.

'Ya reckon we should check it out?' Deacon asked, uncertain.

'Might be a claim in it, Deac. Split two ways we might be able pay off the techs and ship outta here, I guess.'

'Split two ways, Sol?' said Deacon, a wry grin touching his lips as realisation dawned.

'Aye, vox down to the crew. Tell 'em to head back without us.'



THE ADEPTUS Astra Telepathica acolyte led Captain Vrorst into the vaulted chamber of the Astropathic Choir. Neme hurried to keep up with the

Kasrkin officer. He halted abruptly in the centre, causing the psyker to stumble as she barely avoided colliding into his back.

The acolyte approached a shadowed niche at the head of the dimly lit chamber, and bowed before his master, Astropath Primus Grenski, who reclined amidst a mass of purity sealed pipes and cables on a spartan couch within. Grenski did not acknowledge the younger adept, as he was deep within the trance that would allow him to transmit his thoughts light years across the gulf of interstellar space, to commune with his peers on a thousand other worlds.

Captain Vrorst surveyed the chamber, obviously impatient with such matters. He preferred to leave this sort of thing to Fortuna, the sanctioned psyker attached to his command. Neme could sense he was ill at ease in the company of those who did not serve the Emperor as he did, with cold logic and cold steel.

'What's the problem, adept? Why have you interrupted my sweep?' Vrorst had been busy overseeing the station's security in the aftermath of the sighting of the intrusion, and Fortuna's subsequent report of her viewing trance.

'My master has been within the auto-séance for three hours now, captain. He should have established contact with another terminus long ago. His life signs indicate he has not, and that he is locked within his trance. Those signs have started to fluctuate wildly.'

'So?' asked Vrorst, his ignorance at the adept's words plain.

'He means,' interrupted Neme, as the acolyte stumbled over an explanation, 'that something out there is blocking him, stopping him from getting the message out that the intruders are here.'

'Well, there's no way to be sure of that.' The acolyte glanced at her lapel. 'Lieutenant.'

Neme scanned the chamber, wrapping her arms around herself against the cold. Another seven niches were arrayed around the room, an astropath reclining within each one. Her breath fogged as she spoke.

'No? Well something isn't right, and we all know that an intrusion this close to the Gate is bad news.'

'I can assure you, lieutenant, that everything is...'

An alarm blared from a brass horn above Adept Grenski's niche, and every astropath in the choir suddenly sat bolt upright before collapsing back down within their couches. A look of horrified disgust crossed the captain's face, but Neme was looking at the reader mounted next to Grenski's niche. A series of green lines crossed the display, each zigzagging wildly.

The adept was clearly on the verge of panic, and Vrorst was barking an order to the Kasrkin in the lobby without. Neme's eyes left the reader and settled on the face of the astropath. She shivered, and realized abruptly that it was not nerves turning her skin to goose flesh, but the temperature. It was falling rapidly.

A drop of blood appeared at Grenski's nostril. Something stabbed into Neme's mind, a spike of indescribable agony at the centre of her brain that withdrew as suddenly as it had appeared, sending her crashing to her knees, clutching her head in her hands.

The acolyte was praying, and Neme opened her watering eyes to see that the astropath's face was covered in a thin skein of ice. She turned her head, seeing the occupants of the other niches were similarly affected. She tried to stand, but her knees were stuck fast to the frost glazing the paved floor.

Two Kasrkin rushed into the room and grabbed Neme under her armpits, dragging her back towards the chamber door.

The acolyte collapsed at his master's feet and let out a piteous wail, the sound Neme imagined a lost soul might voice as it writhed in the flames of purgatory. The last thing she saw as she was pulled from the choir chamber was steady streams of blood from every astropath's nose, freezing, even as they poured, to shatter into a thousand ruby shards as they hit the cold stone floor.



SOL RAISED HIS head over the rock to get a clear view of the base of the crater. Glimpsing movement below, he ducked back down as Deacon reached the top of the path and collapsed, out of breath, beside him.

'Whadya see, Sol?'

The miner raised his hand to silence him, and edged around the base of the rock. Less than fifty metres below he could make out three towering metal forms, mechanical claws sunk into the hard ground, with strange symbols etched on every surface. Large figures moved around them. Sol had never seen suits the like of which they were wearing. The machines were moving, and Sol's eyes widened in disbelief as he realized their claws were digging down into the earth with an insect-like scurrying motion that he had never seen a machine do before.

'Now that's some rig,' whispered Sol, anger passing over his features at the prospect of another crew working his claim.

'That ain't no rig, Sol. I don't for the life of me know what it is, but I'm tellin' ya, that ain't no rig I ever seen.' Deacon was leaning out over the rock face, and the pair saw the three machines sink entirely beneath the dusty ground as the figures below dispersed.

'Ok, ok. We gotta think this through,' said Sol. The thought that perhaps the intruders were not merely competing prospectors, but something far worse, caused him to reconsider the wisdom of his decision to send the crawler home without them.

'Right, I got a plan...'

A single shot rang out from scant metres behind them. Sol spun, only to be confronted by a giant in black and gold armour standing over him. Edging back against the rock, he glanced to his side at Deacon. The other miner was spread-eagled, the back of his hood a ragged mess and a fan of blood and bone spattered across the boulder.

The black-armoured warrior swung his aim across, and Sol found himself staring down the barrel of the pistol.

'Damn,' cursed Sol. The harsh report of the bolt pistol echoed off the sides of the cliff face and rolled out over the barren wastes as the Black Legionnaire pulled the trigger.



CAPTAIN VRORST stood at the centre of the control chamber, hands clasped behind his back. Before him, a bank of pict-screens lined the wall, each manned by a Cadian staff officer. Each viewer relayed the scene from a surveyor; some set atop the armoured towers of the listening station, others mounted on remote pylons several kilometres out into the wastes.

Seven of the viewers had gone off-line in the last twenty-nine minutes.

An ensign, turned and beckoned to his captain. 'Sir, squad three reports Sector Epsilon clear. The surveyor shows no sign of interference.'

Vrorst grunted and the officer returned to his vigil, relaying the order to the squad to move on to Sector Gamma. Picking out surveyor Epsilon Seven from the bank of screens, Vrorst could make out the men of squad three as they prepared to depart. They were deployed in textbook fashion: the perimeter secured and a two-man detail investigating the survey unit. The squad leader was Sergeant Heska, a man who had served under Vrorst for the best part of two years. If they got through whatever was headed their way, thought Vrorst, he was due a promotion.

'Tell Heska to move his men on,' Vrorst ordered, turning as Lieutenant Fortuna appeared at his side.

'Wait,' Neme called, and the staffer turned, looking to his superior for confirmation.

Irritation crossed Vrorst's face as he turned to look down at the psyker. 'Lieutenant Fortuna, either leave my command centre, or hold your tongue!' Silence descended and none dared turn to watch.

Fortuna raised her flushed face to meet the captain's steely glare. She was much shorter than the veteran officer, and her voice trembled as she replied.

'Captain, please listen to me. I'm schooled in these matters. Something's wrong out there, I know it.'

Vrorst turned and gestured at the viewers. 'Of course something's wrong, Fortuna.'

'Surveyor Gamma Twelve has just gone off-line, sir,' the ensign said, confirming Vrorst's statement.

'I can see, ensign. Put me through to Sergeant Heska, right now.'

The ensign's hands moved over a series of dials and switches, and he spoke quietly into his vox set. 'On the vox, sir,' he eventually replied.

Addressing Sergeant Heska, Vrorst spoke clearly, the tone of an experienced leader of men ringing clear in his voice. 'Heska? Listen to me and follow my orders to the letter. Squad nine is holding station at Gamma Three. I want you to fall back and regroup with Klorin's squad. It's only half a kilometre due west of your position. Confirm.'

Static burbled from the vox horn for a moment, before Heska's voice cut through amidst a storm of interference. 'Confirmed, captain, moving out now.'

'Tell him to hurry. Something's close.' Neme stood beside Vrorst, her expression betraying uncertainty warring with the determination to make him appreciate the danger she sensed was near. Vrorst bit back a caustic reply, instead ordering a staffer to call up the view from surveyor Gamma Three.

The picture appeared on the large screen in the centre of a wall. The scene was one of controlled, drill ground efficiency as squad nine took position in what little cover was afforded by the scattered boulders and low defiles out in the wastes. The minutes stretched out, punctuated by a staffer confirming Heska's position and status. Each time a curt, 'no contact,' was the reply.

After thirty-three minutes, the staff officer drew Vrorst's attention to the main screen. A dust blizzard was closing in on

squad nine's position, reducing visibility to less than twenty metres. Another five minutes passed, and a silhouette emerged from the storm. The men of squad nine raised their hellguns at the figure, and the challenge came loud over the main vox.

'Identify. Arcadia.'

'Arcadia est,' came the swift and correct reply.

Sergeant Klorin stepped out from cover to shake the hand of his comrade, Sergeant Heska, while the next man followed in. Neme's indrawn gasp caused every head in the chamber to turn towards her.

'Tell him...'

Sergeant Heska tumbled forward against Klorin as his chest exploded. Klorin must have assumed his friend had stumbled, and bent down to lend a hand. The movement saved his life, as a fusillade of bolter fire erupted from the storm, pinning the Kasrkin of squad nine behind cover. Klorin, reading the situation, dragged Heska's limp form into the cover of a low rock, bellowing orders to his men.

Vrorst stepped forward, addressing a tech-priest hovering near the cogitator banks. 'Adept, I need that surveyor set to read the body heat of whoever's assaulting my men. Can you do it?' The tech-priest nodded and began a recitation of the *Canticle Machina* over the surveyor bank.

Turning to a staff officer, the captain barked his next order. 'Ensign, I want a Valkyrie out there right now. Those men must be evacuated immediately.'

'But, sir,' the staffer began to protest, 'the storm will make—'

'Don't give me excuses, damn it, just do it!'

The scene on the main screen switched to a kaleidoscopic riot of colour as the tech-priest petitioned the machine's spirit to relay an image based on thermo graphic readings. The colours resolved into solid masses, the cold air of the dust storm visible as swirling, deep blue vortices and the forms of the Kasrkin as distinct, red shapes. The surveyor altered its focus, seeking to penetrate the veil of howling dust that obscured the attackers.

A score of orange forms emerged from the blue, the heat issued from them so intense the surveyor could not resolve their exact shapes beyond this formless mass. Twin stars of bright white sat at the shoulder of each figure, and further strobes of glaring light indicated muzzle flashes as bolters spat high velocity explosive rounds into the Kasrkin position. A clutch of fading red smears indicated that the men of Heska's squad had fallen, cut down from behind before they could reach the dubious safety of squad nine's position.

Vrorst addressed the remaining squad leader with an authoritative calm. 'Klorin. I have a Valkyrie closing on your position, ETA...' He glanced at the tactical reader, 'ETA three minutes thirty. Until then you have some soldiering to do.'

Sergeant Klorin's voice came across the vox, barely audible above the chatter of bolter shells, the crack of hellguns and the howl of the dust storm. 'Confirmed, sir. We'll hold them, pending extraction.'

'You'll do as I say, sergeant, or there will be no extraction. Now listen to me...'

Captain Vrorst relayed a series of instructions to the squad leader, specifying targets that the Kasrkin could not acquire through the dust, but that he could read clearly on the thermographic surveyor. Over the next minute, three of Klorin's men fell to bolter fire, before Vrorst ordered the men to fall back to a small ravine they could defend should the position be attacked frontally. Thirty-eight seconds later one of the attackers fell to the disciplined fire of the remaining defenders, and a brief cheer filled the control chamber before a stern look from Vrorst silenced the staff. Another ten seconds, and the attackers had moved around to outflank the Kasrkin. Vrorst redirected Klorin's squad to fire on the new threat, and another attacker fell.

Another twenty seconds, and only three of the squad remained. Massive forms emerged from the dust, and the Kasrkin were firing at will.

Vrorst turned to a staffer, grim resolution etched across his features. 'Recall the Valkyrie.'

Neme turned on him. 'You can't! You've got to get them out of there. You can't just let them die without...'

Vrorst met her gaze and indicated the screen. The last of the Kasrkin had fallen, and the attackers had taken the position.

Dejected, the psyker made to leave the chamber, but turned once more to speak.

'You knew they didn't have a hope, didn't you?'

'Of course I knew, lieutenant. But those men were Cadians; they were Kasrkin. They deserved nothing less than a warrior's death. And that's what I gave them.'



OVER THE COURSE of the next six hours, Captain Vrorst supervised the preparations for the attack he was now certain would come. Though the base was well defended, he made certain every conceivable eventuality was covered, above and beyond that which the layered defence hardware and the elite of the Cadian military were trained for. Every entrance to the listening post was welded shut, booby trapped with frag grenades and guarded by a squad of Kasrkin. Flak board barricades were erected across every corridor, and heavy weapon positions placed at each intersection. Every last man of the company knew his role in the defence, and manned his post with the determination the Cadians, and in particular, the elite Kasrkin, were famous across the Imperium for. Plans were laid, fire solutions calculated and rally points identified. If a position should collapse, the defenders would fall back to the next, under covering fire from the men occupying it. The final stand would be made at the central keep, the chamber of the astropathic choir. If that should fall, then there would be no further point in a fighting withdrawal, for all would be lost.

Throughout this period, Neme meditated. She had prayed to the Emperor, so many light years away on distant Terra, that she would not fail in her duty to Him.

She had prayed that Astropath Primus Grenski, the sole survivor of the events in the astropathic chamber, would awake from his deathbed and somehow summon the strength to get a warning to Cadia, to anybody, to warn of the attack. She prayed that, should the attack come and Vrorst's defences fall, the Emperor would lend her strength to face her death in the manner the teachings of the Cadian progeniums proscribed: on her feet and with her wounds to the fore.

In the apothecarium, Astropath Primus Grenski awoke from feverish dreams of worlds in flames and the diabolic hordes of the Arch Enemy vomiting from the hellmouth of the Cadian Gate. He was too weak to call out. Sensing his death was near, he attempted once more to broadcast an astrotelepathic plea for aid. But another mind sensed his own, and unleashed the full extent of its powers against his frail, battered psyche. As life ebbed from his ancient frame, Grenski consoled himself that he had tried, though whether he had succeeded, he would never know.



THE FIRST WARNING of the attack came when the power cut out across the complex. The bank of surveyor screens went black in a second, and the consoles died. The omnipresent background vox-chatter fell silent. Standing in the centre of the command chamber, Neme found her world plunged into disorientating darkness.

There was a moment of preternatural still and then a harsh white beam cut through the gloom, dazzling her. An instant later more beams illuminated the chamber. With a sigh of relief, Neme realized that the Kasrkin guards had activated the torches slung under the barrels of their hellguns.

A beam swung across the chamber, to pick out Captain Vrorst. 'Get that light out of my face, trooper!' he ordered testily. 'Adept, where are the back-ups?'

A hooded adept of the Machine God, visible only as a bent form in a shadowed corner of the chamber, began a low chant as he prised open a purity-sealed access panel. He paused in his work long enough to issue a sibilant hiss of annoyance, before striking an illuminated rune he had uncovered amidst the innards of the machinery.

A bass thrum, felt deep in the gut rather than heard with the ear, filled the room. The drone soared painfully up the scale until it was an ultrasonic squeal, beyond the range of human hearing. An instant later, a heavy jolt shook the chamber and a deep red illumination grew in brightness from emergency glow globes, casting a hellish radiance across the occupants as the reassuring hum of the back-up generator settled into the background.

The surveyor screens spluttered back to life, and the staff officers manning their posts began the rituals necessary to bring their consoles back on-line. Vrorst knew from experience that he would be tactically blind until his command centre was fully operational again, but that was one of the reasons the Cadians, along with other Imperial Guard regiments, employed sanctioned psykers.

'Lieutenant Fortuna, if you'd be so kind?'

Neme started, realizing the captain had addressed her. 'Sir?'

'Lieutenant, you may have noticed that we've just lost all command and control capability short of the squad-level vox. I have no idea what has caused the power shut down, and I have no way of finding out until the security net is back up. If you wouldn't mind, and if you're not too busy, perhaps you could find the time to use those vaunted powers of yours to find out what the hell is going on?'

Neme resolved to rise above Vrorst's sarcasm. Though he was her commanding officer by dint of rank, she answered to the officio psykana back on Cadia, and would no longer be cowed by his bearing. She stood firm, lifted her head in defiance, and faced the captain.

'I'll need absolute silence,' she said.

Vrorst merely nodded and stalked off to the surveyor stations to hurry up their restarting. Neme watched him for a

moment, reading the emotions radiating from him in palpable waves. She was a psyker, and well accustomed to the distaste, or outright hostility most people felt towards her kind. It was often only in the service of the Guard that a sanctioned psyker could earn respite from the distrust of others and find a productive outlet for their powers. Ironically, a life of isolation or persecution was often violently curtailed upon the battlefields of the Cadian Gate, as many a psyker would lay down their lives in defence of those who hated them.

Neme closed her eyes and, taking a deep breath, allowed her extrasensory powers to absorb the emotions of those around her. She filtered out the tension in the command chamber, and cast her psychic net further afield. One sector at a time, she scanned the perimeter of the complex, seeking out thoughts that did not belong to the defenders. At the edge of her inner-hearing, she caught an echoing whisper, like the sound of malicious plotting in the nave of an empty cathedral. Bracing herself, she homed in, a feeling of utter menace welling up inside her. Suddenly she realised the nature of the threat and severed the psychic link.

She broke the contact a moment too late. An explosion of pain erupted behind her eyes, the psychic backlash throwing her several metres across the chamber. She caught a railing and braced herself as a second wave hit, fighting with all her resolve against the white-hot lance of another's psyche. She drew strength from years of conditioning, calling upon deep reserves of her own power. With a tremendous effort of will, she forced the probing claws of agony from her mind, exorcising the other's intrusion with a primal scream of denial.

Gasping for breath, she shouted at Vrorst, 'Sector twelve!' before slumping to the floor in exhaustion.



ATHUNDEROUS explosion rocked the station, shaking the command chamber and setting off wailing alarms.

The squad level vox burst into life and a staff officer called to Vrorst over the din, 'Sir, sector twelve is under fire, reporting unidentified contacts assaulting their position.'

'Command group, with me. That means you too, Fortuna. On your feet. Squads seven and twelve form up, one and two, get this chamber secure and stay alert.'

The Kasrkin moved into position without hesitation, and Vrorst's command squad was at his side in an instant. A sergeant ushered Neme forward, along with a vox-operator, a medic and two troopers carrying flamers.

The guards stationed at the entrance to the command chamber hauled open the massive blast doors, and Vrorst led his men out into the emergency-lit passage. Jogging down the corridor, the troopers of squad seven took the point, hellguns levelled and covering every angle from which an attacker might appear. The point man reached a bulkhead door that led to the loading bays, and the group covered the trooper as he turned the locking wheel.

The door ground aside, revealing a scene of desperate combat. A squad of Kasrkin poured a fusillade of hellgun fire the length of the loading bay from behind a flakboard barricade. At the far end, a score of two and a half metre tall giants were advancing, halting periodically to fire off explosive bolter rounds that tore great chunks from the defenders' cover.

Vrorst took position at the barricade, his men following his example. 'On my mark... fire!'

As the attackers advanced, thirty hellguns opened fire as one. Though not individually as powerful as a bolter, massed hellgun fire is capable of overwhelming most foes, no matter how well armoured they may be. The nearest attacker faltered, great chunks of his breast plate disintegrating as the volley hammered home. The armour fused and bubbled, a single bright las-round exploited the weakness opened up, and speared through the figure's torso to erupt

from its back in a shower of sparks. The giant fell. It did not bleed, for its wounds were instantly cauterised.

Vrorst ordered a second volley, and this time three more of the armoured behemoths fell. The advance slowed, and one of the attackers sought cover in a side corridor rather than risk another fusillade. The defenders took a collective breath, but kept up their surveillance of the bay. Vrorst was proud of every one of his men, knowing that a less well-disciplined unit than the Kasrkin would erupt in cheers at this stage, creating a moment of vulnerability an experienced enemy could exploit.

'Sir?' Vrorst's vox-operator crawled to his side, a portable scanner held before him. 'They're moving down corridor delta seven, sir, I think they've overridden the lock-out. They'll be on us in thirty seconds.'

'Fall back by squads, to rally point secondus delta seven. Go!' Vrorst yelled as he ushered the first of the Kasrkin past.

With drilled proficiency, each squad withdrew from the barricade, covering one another as they stepped down. Vrorst was the last to quit the loading bay, and the clang as he slammed the blast door shut rang down the corridor as he jogged after his men.

An explosion tore into the head of the file, ripping apart the point men. The corridor was instantly choked with reeking smoke and the screams of the wounded. A trooper tumbled out of the turmoil, one arm hanging limp and blasted at his side, while the other fired his hellgun into the darkness behind. The medic ran to his side to usher him to safety as more Kasrkin knelt and poured suppressive fire into the roiling smoke. The vox-operator was at Vrorst's side, trying all he could to get a fix on the situation.

'My set's wasted, sir. I can't get a clear reading.'

Vrorst cast his gaze around, and located Neme. 'Can you tell what's going on up there, lieutenant?' Though visibly shaken, the psyker nodded, and after a moment of stillness shook her head.

'I can't, sir, someone's—'

A hail of explosive bolts scythed from the smoke, followed a moment later by the silhouette of a massive, bulky form. The figure was revealed as its passing caused the smoke to part: a giant of a man in baroque power armour, the evil of millennia writ large across his helmeted visage. He stooped and with one hand choked the life from a nearby Kasrkin, whilst putting a bolt round into the throat of another, a fountain of arterial blood, that looked like black tar in the red emergency lighting, sprayed across the wall.

In Vrorst's long career he had never seen such a foe, but there was no doubt in his mind now as to the identity of the attackers: Traitor Marines of the Black Legion, the praetorians of Warmaster Horus himself, the Arch Traitor. Seeing his men being slaughtered where they stood, and judging that they were on the verge of being overwhelmed, he bellowed the order to retreat to the command chamber.

'No, wait,' stammered Neme. 'Not the command centre, there's something... someone... the Star Chamber! We've got to get the astropathic choir.'

Rounding on Neme, the captain was silenced by the certainty in her expression. His command was falling apart and he was expected to trust psyker witchery? Cursing the vagaries of fate, he rescinded his order, instructing the squad leaders to head for the Star Chamber instead.

The Kasrkin fought a fighting withdrawal down the length of corridor and past a bulkhead door that was blown open by a thundering blast almost as soon as it was sealed behind them.

The Black Legion pursued relentlessly, the Kasrkin unable to bring their own weapons to bear in any meaningful way in the confines of the passageways. Men fell screaming, and Vrorst took a bloody wound to the shoulder from a ricocheting bolt as they made for the final junction before the Star Chamber. Rounding a corner, they found themselves running towards a hastily erected barricade across the chamber entrance, and threw themselves over it as reaching arms dragged stragglers to safety.

Vrorst took in his command. Less than a score of men had survived, and his vox-operator and medic were missing. Taking position with the barricade's defenders, the remaining Kasrkin prepared to sell their lives dearly at this, the last rally point.

The Black Legion gave chase, emerging into the junction before the Star Chamber and a dozen, towering men spreading out as they raised their bolters. At their head was a figure from a nightmare, his armour wreathed in arcane sigils, black robes billowing behind him. Cold blue electrical discharges wreathed his hand as he gestured towards the defenders.

None behind the barricade knew the tongue in which the sorcerer spoke, but all felt the meaning behind his dark words deep within themselves. Here was a follower of the Ruinous Powers, and he intended to offer every soul in the complex to his corrupt masters.



NEME FORCED the sorcerer's incantation from her mind, attempting to gather her strength for one last stand against the impossible odds facing them. But her thoughts were interrupted by a new presence, a shift in the ebb and flow of the powers raging around her. She tilted her head as if straining to discern a single whisper above a thunderous chorus. What was it she could hear?



THE BLACK Legionnaires opened fire, a storm of bolts punching through the flakboard barricade and cutting men down in bloody swathes. The Kasrkin returned fire, though for every last blast they unleashed ten bolt rounds were returned.

The Black Legionnaires were almost on the barricade when a piercing sound cut through the din of battle and the haze of gun smoke. A mournful howl, low and feral echoed down the corridors.

The roaring of the Black Legionnaires' bolters fell silent, and the sorcerer's blasphemous utterances caught in his throat. Another howl split the air mere metres behind the Traitor Marines. They paused, casting uncertain glances into the shadows.

Neme raised her head above the barricade in time to see a Black Legionnaire snatched from behind and dragged into the dark. A bestial snarl grew to a savage outburst of rage and the sound of splitting ceramite armour rang from the walls.

The Traitor Marines began firing into the shadows around them, emptying entire magazines at targets none of the defenders could see. Taking advantage of the distraction, Vrorst led his men back into the Star Chamber, and the massive, embossed doors slammed together as the last man stumbled through.

The sounds of battle increased to fever pitch on the other side of the portal, screams of rage and pain muffled by the barrier. Then silence for a moment, broken an instant later by the doors exploding inward.

The Black Legion sorcerer stood framed in the doorway, arcs of blue lightning creeping from his hands and along the bulkhead. He scanned the chamber, his visored gaze sweeping the survivors until it came to rest upon the form of Neme Fortuna. She sensed his recognition, for he knew she was a pysker, the last person with any hope of calling for outside aid. As he strode towards her, Captain Vrorst drew his chainsword and threw himself at the Traitor, only to be batted aside with contemptuous ease with a single back handed stroke. Vrorst flew across the chamber, slamming into the stone wall with a sickening crunch of splintering bone.

The sorcerer advanced on the defenceless psyker, more Black Legionnaires flanking him. The last of the Karskin made to intercept them, but were cut down by

bolt rounds or hacked apart by screeching chainswords. The reek of gun smoke and freshly spilled blood assaulted Neme's senses, as she pulled herself upright, determined at least to face her death on her feet.

As she straightened, back to the cold wall, a Black Legionnaire screamed in pain and rage, his back arching and his arms spread wide. His bolter clattered to the floor, as a white hot light speared from his eyes and mouth. The point of a sword, afire with pristine energy burst through his chest plate, transfixing him for an instant before it was withdrawn, sending the Traitor's blasted body crashing to the ground.

Another man stepped through the entrance, fully a match for the Black Legionnaires in bulk and height. But in stature the similarity ended, for this mighty warrior wore dark grey armour, adorned with a panoply of pelts, totems and fetishes. Mounted over his bald head was a hood of intricate crystalline nodes that formed a halo of psychic bale-fire around him. Neme was overwhelmed by the power emanating from him, and knew that here was a master of the pysker's craft, infinitely more accomplished than she could possibly aspire to become.

The Black Legion sorcerer turned, a low hiss sounding from the mouthpiece of his helmet. Issuing a guttural incantation, he pointed at the chamber entrance, and a violet-hued barrier of warp-spawned power sealed it so that none could interfere. He took a step back, clearly making room for the clash he knew would ensue. As dulled sounds of battle emanated from beyond the barrier, the warrior stepped forward, the glow from his crackling hood becoming more intense. He raised his sword, the sorcerer raised his staff, and the two lunged at precisely the same instant.

The warrior-mystic was faster, deflecting the Traitor's weapon with a back-handed parry. Stepping inside his opponent's guard, he brought his knee up hard, slamming it into the sorcerer's stomach. The Legionnaire doubled over, but cartwheeled his staff up behind him as he did so, driving it into the warrior's chest

armour. The newcomer staggered as arcane fire flickered across his body, a mighty crack in the ceramite of his breastplate evidence of the sorcerer's strength.

Indistinct shadows appeared at the entrance, mighty claws raking at the mystical barrier.

Putting space between them, both combatants stepped back. Neme could sense the build up of arcane energies. Pure white light danced across the warrior's blade, while a black nimbus appeared before the Traitor. Both men stood immobile as the energies built, accompanied by a roar of psychic feedback that caused Neme to drop to her knees, her hands clamped over her ears.

As one, both combatants unleashed their pent up energies, which jumped the centre of the chamber in a heart beat and thundered into the other caster. Both were thrown sprawling to the floor, and through the play of sorcerous powers Neme saw that the warrior-mystic was grievously wounded, a terrible gash running along one side of his head and blood seeping from the crack in his chest.

The warp-barrier was assailed by frenzied shapes throwing themselves against it, accompanied by a savage roar of anger and pain.

The Traitor gained his feet and stood, unsteadily at first, but then with an arrogant swagger as he crossed to the fallen warrior. The energies playing around his hood spat and sputtered, the pure light of his force sword fading, to be replaced with the gleam of ordinary steel. The sorcerer raised his staff high above his head with both hands.

Neme saw with absolute clarity that she could not allow this to happen. In the infinite chasm between one moment in time and the next she drew every last shred of energy she possessed, drawing so deep on reserves of psychic power that she could feel the creatures of the warp scratching at her soul as she channelled the very stuff of their realm through her flesh.

She screamed as her body became a vessel for a tidal wave of arcing energies, unleashing it in a mighty, uncontrollable burst at the Black Legion sorcerer. The force of her attack sent him reeling, an

upraised hand attempting to repel the lightning that enveloped him. Caught up in the blizzard, the sorcerer never saw the sweeping blow of the warrior-mystic's sword that clove him in two from the crest of his helm to his groin in one mighty downward slash.



NEME FOUGHT to hang on to the last shreds of consciousness. Through eyes that refused to focus she saw the warp-barrier blink out of existence, and a creature from nightmare leap through the Star Chamber entrance. It lunged at her, pinning her to the ground, animal jaws snapping in her face as its claws raked the flesh of her forearms.



ASINGLE WORD in an unfamiliar tongue cut through the snarling, and the beast was gone. Neme opened her eyes to see the back of the warrior as he stalked from the chamber, a loping creature with wolf-like features wearing the mangled remains of tarnished dark grey armour, at his side.

'Wait...' she said. He paused, silhouetted in the fires raging in the passage beyond. 'Who are...'

The warrior held up a hand and uttered words Neme could not understand, before reforming the sentence in a tongue he had clearly not used in many years.

'Who I am is immaterial, girl. That I was here is all that matters. We leave now to continue the hunt, for the Great Betrayer is abroad once more.'

A massed, doleful howling echoed down the corpse-strewn passages of the Ormantep Listening Station.

'Wait!' she called again.

But the stranger was gone.

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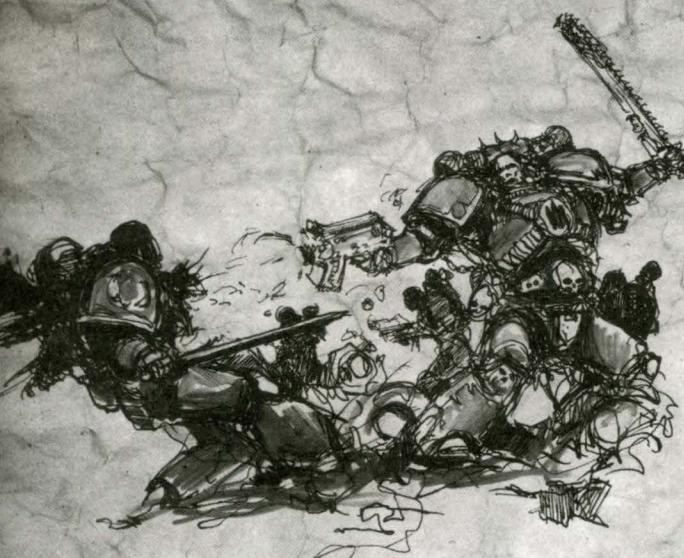
BY: Inquisitor Fortez

RE: Investigation into Traitor Legion recruitment and gene-seed procurement practices

THOUGHT: Adversity is the price of purity.

My Lord,

My investigations into the methods employed by the Traitor Legions to recruit new followers, replace combat losses and procure fresh gene-seed material has found a number of diverse practices, each of which I shall discuss in turn.



Renegades

Our Ordo holds a substantial body of evidence relating to 'rogue' Space Marines. These are not the original members of the Traitor Legions, but individual Space Marines who have reneged on their vows to their Chapter and to the Emperor and have become forever damned.

There are rare instances of entire Chapters turning to the Ruinous Powers. You are no doubt aware of the circumstances surrounding the Badab Uprising and the rebellion of the Astral Claws. I have in my possession accounts referring to other wayward Chapters, the survivors of which now serve in the Traitor Legions. I would hypothesize that a force such as the Astral Claws will, upon turning to Chaos take one of two paths. Depending on the Chapter's size, it may become a viable force in its own right, surviving through raiding, or, if its numbers are too few, may eventually seek out and be subsumed by an existing Traitor Legion.



Raids
I have evidence of numerous raids by the Traitor Legions with the sole intent of capturing specific individuals for recruitment. The modus operandi of these raids seems to depend upon the Legion undertaking them, with differing target preferences evident. By way of example, in 438872.M4l a company of Word Bearers undertook a raid on the St. Sabbat Schola Progenium on the world of Antigone's Harbour. It is my belief that these most accursed of traitors targeted the Progenium facility intent upon turning to their cause those progenies who would otherwise have become the most loyal of imperial servants. This evil sickens me to my soul, and it is my hope that should the rest of my warnings go unheeded, this crime at least should be punished.



Aspirants

Various sources indicate that the lowly servants of the Traitor Legions, the serfs, cultists and slaves actually aspire to join the ranks of their masters. It would appear that these deluded fools are encouraged to perform the direst of acts in an effort to prove they are worthy of undergoing the trials to become a Traitor Legionnaire. The nature of these trials will vary enormously according to the character of the Legion; the only constant I have observed is that few of these aspirants survive, much to the delight it would seem of their masters.

Genomancy

Remote-prognostication ceremonies have divined a number of practices that I can barely bring myself to relate to you. These ceremonies have uncovered visions of vast daemonic sacks, wombs if you will, nourished by the most infernal of machinery. Within such incubators are grown the new members of the Traitor Legions. Initially, we feared we were being led astray in these hellish visions and that malevolent forces were intent upon misdirecting our investigations. Then, my most gifted seer received a vision of a distant battlefield where the forces of Chaos picked over the bodies of fallen Space Marines. The body of each fallen warrior was stripped of those organs unique to the Adeptus Astartes. A moment before I was forced to end the seer's life, he witnessed these organs being fed to the monstrosity I describe above. His death was a release, and I pray my companions would offer me the same absolution should my own soul be compromised by such a vision.

Fabius Bile

The former Lieutenant commander of the Emperor's Children has, as you are well aware, proved a dire threat to the Imperium since the dark days of the Heresy. In the wake of the scouring of Arden IX he has assumed a unique position amongst the Traitor Legions. Bile is a master of the proscribed arts of gene manipulation, and he sells his services to the Traitor Legions, providing them with the 'purest' gene seed available. In return, Bile utilises the services of each Legion in his never-ending quest for raw material. It is Bile's ambition to re-seed the galaxy with his own spawn, replacing humanity with a race of monstrosities bred in his own loathsome image.

Bile may be using his arts in connection to the horror discussed in the previous section, but knowing as we do the nature of the servants of Chaos, it could in fact represent an effort to supplant the Traitor Legions' reliance on him for the most suitable gene material.

Bile has of late been accompanied into battle by a cadre of genetically enhanced Legionnaires, the abilities of which have not been seen in a Space Marine since the time of the Crusade. Should the appearance of these creatures have any connection with the Incunabla incident then I fear the road before us has become so much the harder.



Necromancy

We have uncovered evidence that suggests that some Traitor Sorcerers are actually capable of reanimating the bodies of the fallen. We postulate that this practice is largely confined to the followers of the Plague Lord, in whom the line between diseased life and decaying death is indistinct to say the least. I have reason to believe however, that the followers of the Lord of Excess are also capable of a form of this most despicable of practices.

An agent in my employ has brought to me reports of a practice she observed whilst infiltrating a deathcult in Saafir City. The cult was in fact a cover for a group worshipping the so-called Prince of Pleasure. My agent directly witnessed a rite in which a subject was ceremonially sacrificed. The demagogue, an aged crone, reportedly shed the constraints of her own body, her spirit possessing the body before her. I have no evidence to connect these practices to the Emperor's Children Legion, or indeed to any other Traitor Legion but as ever, I stand ready to investigate further should you order it.

Other circumstances

The events uncovered in the Incunabla geno-labs point to another possible source of recruits into the Traitor Legions. Although outside the remit of this investigation, I would recommend that these events be considered when planning policy in this area.

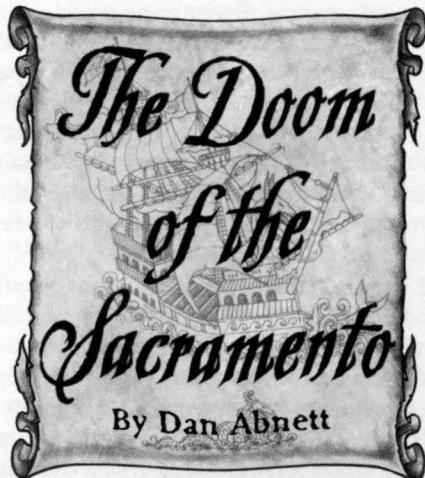
In conclusion, I suspect that our research poses more questions than it answers. I fear that the seeking of the answers to these questions may spell the doom of many more trusted servants of our Ordo, and I would beg of you that only the purest of soul be assigned to any further enquiry into this matter.

I remain, as ever, your most obedient servant,

Tarcoz

CLASSIFIED





A Fell Cargo Story

THIS WAS, pronounced the robust master mate Casaudor, hot enough to boil a dog.

They were eight days north-west of Sartosa, on the Estalian side of the Tilean Sea, and for the last three days of the passage, the weather had become their relentless foe.

The stifling heat commenced at dawn each day, and its intensity climbed with the rising sun. The sky was cloudless, and the scorching white glare of the sun drained the blue out of it like indigo dye faded out of white calico. There was barely a breath of wind to fill the sheets. The decks and the wood of the rails had become too hot to touch. Tende, the Ebonian helmsman, had wrapped cotton kerchiefs around his hands to prevent the spokes of the ship's wheel from burning his flesh.

Hot enough to boil a dog. An apt description for their misery. Listless men cowered on the *Rumour's* deck in what little shadow and shade the masts and canvas availed. Cheeks, forearms and shoulders showed red-raw.

Sesto Sciortini lurked in the shadow of the forecastle. The sea glittered and flashed too brightly to look at. He had been tempted to hide from the sun below decks, but it was airless down there, and there was the ever likely chance of straying into the path of Sheerglas, the master gunner. Sheerglas was a gaunt spectre of a man who scared Sesto more than any other body aboard, with his crisp-as-parchment voice and dry, earthy smell. That, and his hideously pointed teeth.

As befitted a ship of the name, rumours abounded concerning Sheerglas, and Sesto didn't like any one of them. Even in a company of brutes and murderers, Sheerglas was the very devil and it seemed a wonder Luka Silvaro kept him as part of the crew. But there was no gainsaying the skill of Sheerglas and his thin, pallid gun teams.

Because of the heat, the old cook Fahd had quit his galley and refused to work. His stoves had been put out and only salt-fish and dry biscuits were available to the hungry. No one had an appetite anyway. Fahd sat against the base of the mizzen, working designs into a whale tooth with his pot-knife.

The constant swelter had put a pressure into the air, as if the sky was fit to burst. Only a storm would ease that pressure, and when, in each late afternoon, the grumbles of thunder came to their ears from the horizon, they prayed to a man for a break in the weather. But grumbling is all the sky did.

The nights brought no relief either. The still air remained oven-hot till after midnight, and the full moons grinned mirthlessly at the crew's discomfort. Even the starlight seemed hot enough to tan skin.

Sesto consoled himself with the slim fact that Luka's Rievers had not mutinied at once on hearing what designs he had made on their collective destiny. They were pirates no longer; privateers now, so created by a letter of marque and reprisal signed by the Prince of Luccini himself. Amnesty and a fortune awaited every man jack who followed Luka Silvaro on his quest to rid the common sea of the notorious Butcher Ship. This blasphemous craft, said to be the flagship of Red Henri the Breton, was a rapacious predator that had scared the seas empty with its catalogue of abominable crimes.

Of course, the Tilean Sea, that haunt of pirates, had been full of dangers since the beginning of history. Plunderers, throat-cutters, boucaners and hook-handed rogues, stalking Estalian merchantmen and Tilean treasure ships, had made that stretch of blue the most dangerous waterway in the world, and made themselves legends to boot. Sacadra the Jinx, Willem Longtooth, Metto Matez and his brigands, Ezra Banehand, Bonnie Berto Redsheat... they were names and legacies Sesto had read about as a boy in the court at Luccini. In the

current time alone, there was Jacque Rawhead, Jeremiah Tusk and Reyno Bloodlock, not to mention Luka Silvaro and Red Henri, naturally.

But what the Butcher Ship did excelled the work of even the most bloody-handed pirate. It preyed on everything, even other pirates. It was a curse, a force of maritime murder, not so much a ship as a tide of evil.

And the *Rumour* was charged to find it and send it to the bottom. Sesto's role – and it made him queasy to think on it – was insurance. He alone could vouch for the Rievers' work and ensure their reward. So though every man on the boat was concerned to safeguard his welfare, that also made him the most vulnerable man on board.

Then, of course, there was the mere job of finding the Butcher Ship to begin with...

Sesto was snoozing in the midday heat when Roque shook him awake. The Estalian master at arms looked like a lean hunting hound, his skin wet with perspiration.

'Come aft,' he said.

'What? What is it?'

'Come see,' Roque answered. Sesto stood up and fanned his face with both hands. Dark half-moons of sweat stained the armpits of his green silk blouse.

Luka Silvaro, master of the *Rumour* and captain of the Rievers company, waited on the bridge with Benuto the bo'sun, Casaudor and Vento, the chief rigger. Luka nodded to Sesto as he came up the poop stairs with Roque. Luka was a massive man, regally built, his thick, greying hair tied back from his face in a pony-tail. He had affected a wide-brimmed Pavonian hat to keep the blistering sun out of his cold eyes, as if he was afraid the sun's heat might thaw them.

'What is it?' Sesto asked.

The bo'sun, old, craggy and dressed in a shapeless black hat and a frock coat as crimson as a sunset, chuckled and pointed forward. Several leagues away to the west, a little tiara of stationary white clouds hung above the horizon.

'Land,' said Luka.

'Estalia? The coast?' Sesto wondered aloud.

Luka grinned at the mistake. 'Not yet awhile. The islands.'

A great chain of islands and atolls peppered the eastern shores of Estalia. In that dense, half-mapped archipelago lay the

real pirate waters. Few pirates could afford an ocean-going ship. The backbone of the piratical fraternity was the island-hoppers and the atoll-skulkers, who sallied out in longboats from their small, isolated communities to prey on passing merchants foolish enough to water in their territory after the long crossings from the western ocean.

If any place might be the haunt of a Butcher Ship, it was here. Long ago, the gunships and hunters of the Luccini navy had despaired of chasing pirates through the archipelago. So many coves and inlets to hide in, so many places where a flank pursuit could turn, at the spin of a coin, into a bloody ambush. Just twenty years earlier, a flotilla of Luccini warships had harried Jeremiah Tusk into the island chain, and found themselves prey to the merciless guns of a corsair welcome.

'We'll turn to the north,' Luka said, 'and ride the current in towards Isla D'Azure.'

'Why there?' Sesto asked.

'There is a friendly town,' said Casaudor gruffly.

'One where we might water safely and take on stores,' Luka added.

There was something about the cautious attitude of the seadogs that disquieted Sesto. There was something – many things, probably – they weren't telling him.



THEY ENTERED the island chain in the later part of the day. The *Safire*, the *Rumour*'s twelve gun sloop consort, rode in at their port quarter. The first few islands were scrubby knots of bare rock or spits of coral rising like nipples from blooms of sand. Larger islands, festooned with bright green trees, appeared tantalisingly ahead. Some had wide, circular reefs around them, or cusps of rock and sandbars that framed deep, turquoise lagoons. The sky was feathered with scudding clouds and the temperature had dropped a few blessed degrees. Hungry seabirds dipped and mobbed in the wakes of the two ships.

The current was taut. Luka steered the helm team with a combination of memory and an open, annotated waggoner. The waters here were rife with submerged reefs, coral brakes, sandbanks and rocks. Pepy, one of the younger, nimbler crewmen went forward and called the depth with a knot-line.

'A sail!' Sesto said suddenly.

'What?' Luka growled, looking up from his chart. Sesto's comment won him a hard stare from Tende at the helm too.

'I saw a sail,' Sesto insisted. 'To starboard.'

'Where?'

Sesto wished he knew. He'd glimpsed a square of flapping canvas in the skirts of the island to their right, a great mass shrouded in greenery that rose and crowned with a high cliff. He couldn't see the sail any more.

'Over there,' Sesto said. 'This bluff is obscuring it now. It was in there, in the basin there.'

'A sail?'

'Yes.'

'Taking the wind?'

'Indeed yes.'

'You're mistaken,' said Roque cattily. 'That is Isla Verde, and its cove presents promisingly, but it is shallow and toothed with sharp coral. No ship would be in there, certainly not one at sail.'

Sesto frowned. Maybe it had been a trick of the light, or the white flash of a passing gull.

'Let's loose a little top and come around,' Luka said.

Benuto gave him a curious look, and then moved to relay the command to the yardmen. Casaudor signalled the *Safire* to follow them.

'You believe me?' Sesto whispered to Luka, who had come to the rail to scan with his spyglass.

'No,' said Luka. 'But I believe we would be foolish to ignore any possibility.'

They tracked lazily around the head of the island's cove, until the line-man called a danger of grounding on the banks.

'A sail indeed,' Luka said, lowering his glass. He looked at Sesto and grinned. 'Your eyes are sharp.'



BOTH VESSELS furl'd their sheets and dropped anchor at the mouth of the secluded bay. Before them, in the crisp heat of the dying day, a cove fringed by rocky promontories was half exposed, hinting at a lagoon within. Behind that, the green scalp of the island rose like a mountain.

There was no explaining the sail.

They could see it rising proud of the cove, full-canvassed and fat with wind, like a ship running. But it was static, and deep in the lagoon, facing the inner shore of the island.

'There might be a cut into the lagoon,' Roque conjectured. 'One we don't know about.'

'We could be here all day and all night sounding to find it, so tell,' Benuto spat.

'Whatever that, why is it yarded full?' Luka said. 'And not moving?'

Behind them, sat back from the wheel, Tende spat against ill-fortune and touched the gold ring in his ear. He murmured an Ebonian charm.

'Lower boats,' said Luka. 'I want a dozen men. You, for one, Tende.'

The massive helmsman groaned.

'I want your good luck charms where I can hear them,' Luka said.

Under Benuto's barked commands, the crew lowered two longboats from the side of the *Rumour*. The *Safire* stood to and waited. Thunder growled again, and for the first time they saw the blink of lightning in the southern sky.

Luka passed command to Casaudor and went to the first boat, where Tende, Benuto and four other men were taking up oars. In the second boat, Roque assembled his six oarsmen and fixed a swivel gun to the prow.

'Where do you think you're going?' Luka asked Sesto as he began to climb down into the first boat.

Sesto pointed to the island.

'I don't think so,' Luka said. 'You stay here on th—'

'I was the one who saw it,' Sesto said. 'I saw the sail.'

Luka Silvaro pursed his lips and then nodded. 'A fair point.' He ordered two of the men out of the boat to make room for Sesto. Sesto was wondering why two when Ymgrawl, the wizened boucaner and his

shadow bodyguard, climbed down to join them.

'Thou canst row?' Ymgrawl asked.

'Of course.'

'Show it me,' he said.

Sesto took his seat and began to plane the water with his oar as Luka called the stroke.

It had been a long time since Sesto had done anything as menial as row, but he put his back into it. Chopping the calm water like centipedes, the two long boats cleared the *Rumour* and turned into the cove. The rocky promontories quickly hid the anchored ships from them. The last sight Sesto had of the *Rumour* was its gold figurehead, one hand cupped to her ear, the other to her mouth.



THEY ROWED INTO the cove of Isla Verde. It was a wide, shallow basin, so lousy with coral the bellies of the longboats scraped and dragged.

'Name of a god!' Luka said, staring.

The ship lay in the shallows, bow into the beach. It had run into the cove under full sail, rupturing its hull on the banks and shoals before finally foundering and running aground. Sunk up to its gunports, it leaned over in the breakers. Two of its masts were down, but the mainmast still stood proud, sheets billowing, fruitlessly driving the stationary ship against the island. The hull and breastwork were marred by scorched cannon holes, and part of the starboard side was cloven in. This ship had been wounded unto death before it had run, pilotless, to its demise.

The men in the boats gasped and uttered warding prayers. In the second boat, Roque primed the swivel, and every man made sure his weapon was to hand. Sesto was glad he had buckled on his rapier before climbing into the longboat.

'Name of a god!' Luka said again, with greater spleen.

'Do you know her?' Sesto asked, doubling back his stroke.

Luka nodded. He was standing at the bow, a primed pistol in his hand. He took off the Pavonian hat and tossed it down into the gunwales.

'It's the *Sacramento*,' he said.

The *Sacramento*. A notorious barque, the warship of Reyno Bloodlock. *The Reyno Bloodlock*, scourge of the seas.

'Reyno, Reyno, Reyno...' Luka murmured. 'What has come to pass here?'

The ship looked dead. There was no sign of a living soul. On the shore, the tide had flushed up scattered debris from the wreck, and some of the twisted pieces looked like bodies.

They rowed in behind the stern. The window lights of the master cabins had been smashed in, and there was a cannon-hole through the taffrail. Hundreds of gulls perched and cawed along the deck lines.

Under Luka's instruction, they rowed in close, covered by Roque's boat, and Luka tied them up against the mired rudder.

Holstering his pistol, he clambered, nimble as an ape, up the carved breastwork of the stern. Benuto and Tende followed their captain, and then Sesto went after them. Ymgrawl tailed him dutifully.

Thanks to the foundering, the deck was raked at a steep angle. Beyond the shattered taffrail, the poop deck was marred by a crater – the impact of a heavy cannonball. The deckboards were splintered up, and only part of the wheel remained. And part of the helmsman too. His hands and forearms still clenched the wheel spokes, but no other bit of him had survived the blast.

Sesto gagged at the sight of it. Tende drew his blade.

'Someone might yet live,' Luka said. The men spread out.

Sesto crept down the poop steps and went into the upper cabin. The cannonball had spent its worst here, and the fractured decks were spotted with broken glass, shards of porcelain and the burnt, dismembered fragments of a man who had been exploded by the blast. Seabirds had found their way in and were hopping through the shadows, pecking at the scraps of cooked human meat with their long, scarlet bills.

Sesto was damned if he was going to throw up in the presence of these men. He took out his rapier and poked the blade to

scare the birds away. They rose in a flurry, banging their wings and cawing as they escaped through the window lights. What they left behind was a torso, picked half-clean and caked in burned meat.

Sesto vomited.

'Am thee arright?' Ymgrawl asked.

'Yes, I'm... yes,' Sesto said, spitting acid phlegm from his mouth.

'Tis a rude way of death,' Ymgrawl admitted, jabbing at the torso with his cutlass.

Sesto ignored him and went through the partition door into the stepway that descended to the second deck.

The second deck was half submerged. Halfway down the stairs, Sesto stepped into seawater. It filled the companionway to hip-height. He sloshed down into it, and waded along. The door to the master's cabin lay open.

The desk was knocked askew, and the water was covered with floating clothes and charts, a quill, and several hats. They bobbed as he sloshed into the chamber, driving ripples before him.

Raising his arms to keep his balance, Sesto waded unsteadily through the waist-deep water towards the desk. There was someone sitting behind the desk in the high-backed chair, his arms flat across the desktop, his head fallen forward.

Sesto reached the desk. The man looked asleep. He prodded him with the flat of his sword, but there was no response. Sesto reached forward and tugged at the man's doublet front.

The man spilled away before him, arms raised stiffly. There was nothing of him except his head, arms and upper torso. Below the waterline, he was just a chewed and mangled mess of flesh and broken spine and bloated guts.

Sesto cried out and staggered backwards as the corpse up-turned and revealed its horror. He stumbled over something, fell down and was submerged instantly in seawater.

The water roared in his ears. It was deep green and cloudy, with flesh fibres stripped off the corpse.

Something white glided past him.

He erupted to the surface, choking and spluttering. Whatever was in the water with him was big, far bigger than he was. He saw a hooked fin cut the water and disappear around the desk.

Sesto began to panic.

The desk moved, barged through the water by a heavy force.

He slashed at the water around him with his blade. A long ripple cut the water under the cabin windows.

Sesto turned and clawed his way through the water towards the door. He felt a weight of pressure against his legs and turned in time to see a huge, blue-white shape surging towards him, just under the surface, the water rolling like boiling glass back across its sleek form.

Screaming, he lunged his sword at it, and drove it away. An instant later, it was back, powering all ten paces of itself towards his legs. He saw one black, glaring eye and a flash of thumb-sized, triangular teeth.

There was a loud bang and the water went red, and then began to explode into berserk foam.

'Come thee to me!' Ymgrawl shouted from the doorway, holding out a gnarled hand. In his other paw, a flintlock pistol smoked.

Sesto scrambled towards him as the blue-white shape thrashed out its death agonies behind him.



YOU WERE LUCKY,' said Luka Silvaro. 'This ship has become a place of death and all the eaters of the seas have gathered to feed on it.'

Sesto didn't feel lucky. He was still gagging up filthy water, sprawled on the deck where Ymgrawl had dragged him.

'What chance made it a place of death?' Roque wondered, and the men around them remained silent. They were all thinking the same thing.

There was a low rumble. The day was going, and ahead of the settling evening, a mauve darkness had filled the southern sky. The daily threat of a storm was levelling again, but from the look of the heavens it might actually break this time.

INFERNO!

'We must row back, captain,' Benuto said. There was worry in the bo'sun's voice. If the long-promised storm did indeed break this night, they would be stranded on the island for its duration. 'I would not be here o'er night, so tell,' he added.

Luka nodded at this council, briefly touching the gold ring in his ear and the iron of his belt-buckle as luck-charms. The sea breeze had got up a little, flapping the trailing lines and tattered yards of the ruined ship, and bellying the intact sails, making them crack and thump. It cooled the Rievers' skins too, but it was not refreshing. More like a warning chill.

'Let us back to the boats,' Luka said dismally. The sight of his old rival's ruin had affected him more than he cared to admit.

With no small measure of grateful relief, the men turned back to clamber into the longboats.

'Captain!'

They looked around. The call had come from Chinzo, one of Roque's men-at-arms, a swarthy fellow with a sock-cap, a drooping walrus moustache and arms like a wrestler. He pointed a stubby, dirt-nailed finger at the line of beach in the cove beyond the wreck of the *Sacramento*. Litter from the ship's downfall lay scattered on the sand in the gentle fan of breakers. Sesto could see nothing of significance. But Luka clearly had.

'To the shore, before we return,' he ordered. Many of the men, especially Tende and Benuto, groaned.

'To the shore!' Luka insisted.

They rowed the longboats across the short stretch of shallows between the *Sacramento*'s sunken stern and the beach, and hauled the sturdy wooden craft up onto the sand. With the boats sat safe and askew on their keels, the oars piled inside them, the men spread out along the hem of the surf. The breeze was stronger and colder here, blowing straight in between the promontories of the cove from the open sea. Sesto took a look at the dimming southern sky again and saw the glowering darkness as it gathered. The sky at sunset was the colour of amethyst, but there was a fulminous blackness staining through it now that was not the approaching night.

The shore party wandered the breakers, studying the debris washed up there. Some pieces of wreckage were limp, drowned corpses, lifting and flopping in the waves. Seabirds, raucous and unwilling to share their loot, flapped and circled around Luka's searchers.

'What did he see?' Sesto asked.

'Who?' replied Luka.

'Chinzo? What did he see? We really should be getting back. It looks like a storm.'

Luka sniffed. 'It is. And we should.'

'Then what?'

Luka lead him up the beach to where more debris lay. A torn wine-skin. An empty jar. Other nondescript refuse.

'See?'

'Litter has washed ashore,' said Sesto, shrugging. 'We could see that from the ship.'

Luka sighed. 'Use those sharp eyes, Sesto. What is this?' He pointed to the pieces of rubbish on the sand at their feet.

'Litter.'

'And that?' Luka pointed down towards the breakers where the others stood.

'More litter, washed ashore.'

'And this?' He pointed again, apparently at nothing but the sand of the beach. Sesto stared and eventually realised that what Luka was pointing to was the vague mark that separated the smooth, wet silt of the lower beach from the dimpled, drier sand that composed the dunes all the way to the threatening gloom of the treeline.

This, apart from at times of gales and storms, was the furthest point the sea came up the beach. The furthest point any piece of litter could have been washed up.

'Someone survived,' Luka said. 'Someone's here.'



THE FOURTEEN men of the shore party spread themselves out down the length of the lonely beach as the light failed, and hallooed up into the trees of the lush forest that coated the steep island above them. The thick, emerald undergrowth smoked with moisture vapour and rang with the cries of parakeets and

cockatelles. Luka was bent on waiting as long as he dared in the hope that they might yet find some survivor.

Daylight became a cold, grey half-light. There was no gold or heat left in the world, it seemed to Sesto, and every hue and contrast had blanched into a bloodless place of shadows and pale whites. Beyond the promontories, and the spectral hulk of the wreck, the sky was ink-black and the increasingly loud rumbling in the air was accompanied now by sparking forks of lightning. The wind had picked up, and driven the seabirds from the beach. The waves along the shore broke harder and more fiercely than before.

'Another quarter-hour of light,' Luka told the men, 'then we row. Zazara, Tall Willm: you stay with the boats and trim the lanterns. The rest of you, let's look as deep as we dare.'

Sidearms drawn, the rest of the party edged up into the damp fringes of the island's forest. The air was cooling here, but not as fast as out in the open, and consequently thick mists of vapour frothed out of the darkness and trailed between the tree trunks.

Sesto had been into tropical forest before, but always in daylight, when it was a vital place of heat, perfume, busy insects and dappled patterns of light and shade. After dark, it was a dank, smoky place of gloom, cold sweat and skeletal leaf shadows. Creeper-coiled trees loomed over him in silhouette, their lank vine-loops heavy like fat, slumbering serpents. There was a stink of cold sap and foliage mould. Unseen leaf edges cut his knuckles and thighs like hanging blades. He could see no further than the width of a deck. To his left, Chinzo and Leopaldo moved forward through the steam, to his right, off in a line, Benuto, Pepy and the scrawny rating known as Saint Bones. There was no sign of Ymgravl the boucaner, but Sesto knew he would be close by, lurking like a phantom - or a footpad's dagger - close to Sesto's back.

Night insects clicked and ticked in the dripping cold. Gauzy things, some glowing like fireflies, meandered through the vapour. Black, many-legged shapes scuttled across treebark from shadow to shadow.

Luka reached a bank of earth too steep for trees. He struggled up into a small clearing that afforded him a look back over the forest he had ascended through into the cove. It was getting very dark, and lightning was crackling with a mounting fury in the south. He could see the melancholy shape of the Sacramento, but not the beach, as the forest obscured it.

Roque scrambled up behind him, followed by Tende, Jager and Delgado. Luka could hear the others shouting as they came up through the trees.

The master of the Rievers looked up at the sky as the first spats of rain fell. He'd left it too long, like a fool, like a fool...

At once, the rain began to pelt down, the heavy, stinging drops of an equatorial deluge. A westerly gale, like a wall of frozen air, rushed in across Isla Verde, thrashing the forest cover like a sea in flood. Pieces of leaf and twig flew up into their faces through the slanting downpour. The rain was so heavy, he could no longer see the Sacramento, or even the cove. Down below was a tearing, swaying forest and then nothing but blackness and the curtain of rain.

And a screaming voice.

It rose above the din of the encroaching storm for a moment, piercing, then was lost.

'Hellsteeth!' Luka cried, glancing once at the startled Roque before the pair of them of them began to slither and leap back down the slope. Tende and the other men followed. The slope was awash already, fluid as mucous, gushing with rivulets. Jager lost his feet and slid down on his belly. Luka slipped a few paces from the trees and tumbled, crashing into a thorny cypress and gashing his cheek and palms. Tende came down alongside him, his boots plastered with mire and rainwater glinting on his black skin like uncut diamonds. He reached out a massive hand and pulled his captain back onto his feet.

Roque scrabbled past them, and descended into the forest, shouting out the names of the men still down in the dark.

Deep in the trees, Sesto darted left and right, his sword drawn. The awful scream had come from nearby, but now he could see no one and nothing except the dark leaves and the water cascading down through them. The rain clattered like

drumbones across the forest canopy over his head, and all around him the trees swayed, gasped and creaked in the typhoon wind.

'Hello!' he cried. 'Hello anyone!'

He saw a man up ahead, a brief suggestion of a figure in the turmoil, and battled through towards him. By the time he reached the spot where the man had been, there was no one there.

Had there ever been?

Sesto felt a crawling fear, as if this entire isle might be cursed.

Thunder exploded overhead, and lightning strobed the chaotic forest into a brief, fierce chiaroscuro of black leaves and white air. For a second, that thunder-split second, he saw the figure again, off to his left, and resolved a haggard face in shadow, the white of grinning teeth, the black socket holes of a kaput mortem.

Sesto gasped in terror, but at the next flash, the figure had gone. Sesto scrambled away through the undergrowth, hoping he was heading for the beach.

The figure rose up suddenly in front of him, and Sesto slashed out with his sword. The blade rang hard against a cut-less blade.

'Put up thy cutter!' Ymgravl yelled above the storm.

'I saw—' Sesto began.

'What? What didst thee see?' the buccaner snarled, dragging Sesto on by the collar.

'I don't know. Something. A daemon.'

Ymgravl stopped and checked himself, touching gold, silver and iron – a ring, a necklace and a button – to ward away the evil.

'Care o'er thy tongue, for it spits ill luck!' he hissed. 'Did thee scream out?'

'Scream?'

'Just that past minute or more?'

'N-no! I heard the scream and was looking for the source when I saw the... the...' Sesto swallowed hard and touched iron himself. It was difficult to make himself heard over the raging elements.

They pressed on, assaulted by the storm-driven forest. After another minute or so, Ymgravl hollered out, and Sesto saw Benuto, Saint Bones and Pepy coming towards them, heads down.

'Who screamed?' Benuto yelled.

'Not us, bo'sun!' Ymgravl replied.

'Where be Chinzo and Leopaldo?' Pepy shouted.

There was another eye-wincing flash of lightning and an ear-splitting peal of thunder. The stunning display heralded the appearance of Roque and Jager.

'What see you?' demanded the master at arms at the top of his voice.

'Not a hell-damned thing!' Benuto shouted back.

'There!' sang out Saint Bones who, from the top-basket of the *Rumour* could spy a sail at twenty sea miles. 'I saw a man!'

'Where?' snarled Roque.

'In the trees there, just there!' Saint Bones insisted. 'But he is gone now...'

Together now, the drenched and shaken men moved forward, calling out. They came down the slope, across a gushing stream that had not been there on the way up, through a grove of cycads and swaying date palms, hacking back vines that swung at them from the moving trees.

In the next root cavity, swollen with water, they found Leopaldo. He lay on his back, pressed down into the wet, black earth. From his hairline to his waist, the front of him had been torn away. Some massive, clawed forest beast had done this. Some daemon from the cursed dark.

Ten paces away, Chinzo was sprawled on his side against a tree trunk. His sword lay beside him in the mud, broken in two. He was dead, but there was not a mark on him.

Roque turned the body and Sesto saw Chinzo's face. He knew in a moment that Chinzo, brawny warrior that he was, had died of pure terror. And he also knew he would never, ever forget the look on that dead face.

'Get to the boats!' Roque yelled over the constant storm.

'We cannot row in this!' Jager cried in dismay.

'Get to the damn boats anyway!' Roque retorted.

They turned to move.

The figure was behind them.

It was there and yet not there, flickering in and out of the darkness as the lightning flashed. To Sesto – to them all – it looked like a pirate mark come to life: a crude, white figure of dead bones stitched to a black cloth.

It smiled, and the smile broadened and broadened still into a screaming skull mouth. The howl, partly the sound of a man in agony, partly the sound of an enraged animal and partly the sound of angry, swarming insects, drowned out the storm. A rotten breath of putrefaction assailed them. The figure raised its arms as it howled, long, bony arms, impossibly long, famine-thin, ending in spider fingers as sharp as sail-cloth needles.

It came for them, whip-fast, stinking of grave-rot. Roque and Saint Bones lashed at it with their swords and both were struck aside, flying back into the air away from it like vodou bocoor's puppets. Ymgravl threw himself headlong and brought Sesto down hard, avoiding the next slicing rake of the daemon's needled hands.

Jager was nothing like so fortunate. The daemon slammed its taloned fists together in a clap that caught the rating's head between them. Jager's skull burst like a ripe pumpkin.

Benuto and Pepy, the last men standing, opened fire into the face of death. Both men had three primed pistols apiece strung about them on ribbon sashes, and Pepy had an additional pepperpot piece tucked into his waistband. They fired each gun in turn, dropping them loose on their sashes to grab the next. Every ball hit the apparition with a meaty slap. When his sash-guns were spent, Pepy wrenched out the pepperpot and blasted it at the daemon point blank.

It killed him anyway, plunging its needle-fingers into his face. Benuto fell on his back in terror, crying out prayers of deliverance as the thing stepped up to tower over him.

Luka Silvaro burst out of the storm.

He hacked his sword into the daemon, striking it again and again before it could rebalance and turn, like a woodsman chopping at a tree.

It reeled at him and lunged but, by then, Tende was at its other hand, swiping with his long-handled Ebonian axe. As it turned, Delgado attacked too, firing a wheel-lock pistol with one hand and thrusting with his tulwar.

The daemon circled and howled again, fending off the three-cornered assault. It slapped and swung with its elongated arms, trying to find a target.

Then it pounced. It leapt forward like a cat and buried the screaming Delgado beneath its rending, long-shanked bulk.

'Move!' Luka bellowed. 'Move!'

The survivors started to run. Ymgravl and Sesto, Tende, Benuto, Saint Bones supporting the dazed Roque, Luka himself. It seemed to Sesto an act of cowardice and callous fear to use Delgado's fate as a chance to flee, but he did anyway. This was jungle, cursed jungle, and the rules here were dog-eat-dog and every man for himself.

Delgado's ghastly, fluctuating screams echoed after them as they ran and then were lost in the storm.

The seven remaining men broke from the forest line and onto the beach. Rain was sheeting down and the storm was locked, frenzied, above the cove. Breakers slammed into the beach. The fleeing men saw lights ahead.

Tall Willm and Zazara were cowering beside the longboats with lanterns lit. They'd dragged the beached craft right up from the crashing waterline, almost to the trees. The men fell in amongst them, panting and shaking.

'What happened?' Tall Willm piped, lowering his musket.

'Hell happened,' said Ymgravl.

Luka, shaken to the core, checked the men. Terror and palpitations aside, everyone was intact, except Roque. He was semi-conscious and feverish. One of the daemon's needle-talons was embedded in his left shoulder.

'That cannot stay,' Tende muttered. 'Fell magic poison soaks it.'

'Do it!' Luka snapped. He was already looking back down the beach and checking the treeline for signs of daemonic pursuit. 'Ygravl! Bo'sun! Get under the lea of the boats and load all the guns we have!'

Benuto and the boucaner scrambled under the up-turned shell of one of the longboats and started priming weapons in the dry, out of the wind and rain. Saint Bones gathered firearms from the survivors and passed them in under the lip of the boat.

Sesto watched the activity, trying to calm his racing pulse. Tende carefully heated a dirk in the flames of a lamp-wick and then swiftly and brutally cut the needle from Roque's wound. The Estalian didn't even

cry out. The helmsman seemed reluctant to touch the needle. He grasped it with Benuto's bullet-mold press and tossed it away into the storm as soon as it was out.

'What was it?' Sesto asked Luka, shielding his face from the gale.

'The daemon? Oh, I knew it.' Luka turned away and beckoned to Tende. 'We'll not last the night here,' he said. 'We can't row out until the storm has died, and my marrow tells me that will not be before dawn. In the meantime, that daemon will come and kill us here.'

Tende looked away, troubled by something Sesto didn't understand.

'You know what I'm asking, old friend,' Luka said.

'I cannot, Luka. I have sworn that all away, the day I joined the *Rumour*.'

'But you still know!'

'I know. You do not forget these things...'

'Then for me... for these souls here...'

'Luka...'

'Tende... remember the covens of Miragliano... Semper De Deos... the temple at Mahrak... the ash-grey Shores of Dreaded Wo... all those deeds, all those adventures. I stood by you then. I ask this of you now.'

The massive Ebonian nodded. He walked away from them, and started to pace out a wide circle around the huddle of men and the drawn-up boats. Sesto saw he was kicking the sand, gale-blown as it was, to scribe a pattern on the ground.

Tende did this for almost half an hour, all of which time Sesto spent watching the trees and quaking in his boots. Every now and then, above the storm, he heard the howl, the insect buzz, the dire sound of the daemon that stalked them.

Tende rejoined them, cutting his left palm with his dagger and marking with his blood the sides of the boats with strange sigils that Sesto shuddered to look at. He marked each man in turn too – Sesto resisted his touch until he was brought up by an angry bark from Luka. With the Ebonian close, Sesto could hear what he had not heard before. The helmsman was muttering soft, necromantic incantations against the night.

Then Tende dropped to his knees in the centre of the circle, chanting louder and more forcefully.

'Have a care!' Benuto cried.

By then, all the men except the comatose Roque were crouched at the edges of Tende's ring, arms ready, watching the dark as the storm blew down across them.

They all looked as Benuto pointed.

The daemon had arrived.

It was lurching down the beach towards them on all fours, trotting like a limping wolf.

'Are you set?' Luka called to Tende. The Ebonian helmsman continued to chant, ignoring his captain, his back to the loping fiend that bore down on them.

'Tende! Are you ready?' Luka repeated more urgently.

The thing came on. Zazara vomited in terror and Tall Willm gasped, 'Sigmar's Heart!' and raised his musket to fire.

Luka dragged the barrel down. 'No! Don't break the circle!'

The daemon reached them. Sesto felt his bowels turn to ice as it prowled around them, as if not daring to cross the invisible line Tende had marked. He could smell its fetid corruption. It bounded around the circle on all fours, whining and grinning. It was so big, so thin, so hideous.

'Tende?' Luka hissed, covering it with his pistol.

Tende stopped chanting and rose up to join them, averting his eyes from the daemon. 'My dear friend Luka,' he said, 'I hope you're ready. This is what you asked for.'

Sesto felt his spine crawl as if bugs were scuttling up it. He writhed, his ears popping. The storm raged and –

– ceased. Silence suddenly. No wind. Blackness was still all around. Pelting rain was frozen in the air as if arrested by the gods. The scene was illuminated by a lightning flash that had begun but never ended.

The daemon hesitated.

Incandescent green phantoms came spiralling out of the sea behind it, out of the deep oceans. They flashed and glowed, writhing like snakes in the stilled air, and fell upon the daemon.

It grunted and hissed as they tore into it, pinning its limbs and pulling it down. Some of the lambent green phantoms were like coiled wyrms, others writhed like squids,

others like stunted, naked men with heads like goats. Some had no heads at all, just thick outcrops of twisted horns. They swarmed over the daemon, clawing, ripping, bearing down on its struggling limbs.

In the breathless hush, Luka looked out of the circle and said, 'Hello, Reyno.'

The daemon shook and growled under the weight of the glowing phantoms that held it. One of the goat heads got its fingers into the daemon's mouth and pried it open.

'Hello, Luka,' the daemon said, its voice like metal scraping stone.

'What happened to you, my brother?'

'Evil happened. Pure evil...'

'Tell me, Reyno! Tell me!'

The daemon gurgled. 'The Butcher Ship did this to me. It murdered my beloved *Sacramento* and slaughtered the crew and with its final curse made me into this!'

'I'm sorry, Reyno.'

'Sorry? Sorry?' The daemon's aching sob echoed down the stilled beach. 'I am sorry for Delgado and Jager and Pepy and all the other sound men of your crew I have preyed on this night. I did not mean to...'

The voice trailed away.

'Reyno? Are you still there?' Luka called. The phantoms Tende had summoned fought to keep the daemon trapped. After a while, the daemon's voice floated back.

'Luka? I can't see you any more. What will become of me?'

Luka looked at Tende. The Ebonian shook his head.

'Reyno? Tell me about the Butcher Ship.'

'What about it?'

'Tell me everything you know.'

'Henri of Breton is the Butcher. Red Henri, the thrice cursed! He did this to me! He did this to me!'

'Henri? Red Henri? How can that be true that my old friend is the Butcher?' Luka snarled.

'How can it be true that your old friend Reyno is a blood-hungry daemon? Eh? Flee, Luka! Flee! Henri's warship the *Kymera* is the butchering ship, and it spits venom from its guns these days instead of shot! Venom! Look at me!'

The wrenching daemon threw off several of the phantoms and rose up before Luka, the remaining phantoms trying to pull him down.

'Luka...'

'Reyno...'

Tende looked at his captain. 'I can't hold him much longer.'

Without looking back, Luka nodded. 'Finish this.'

Tende began to chant.

Luka remained fixed, staring into the daemon's fathomless eyes.

'Goodbye, Reyno, my old friend.'

The phantoms coiled and renewed their attack. They swarmed all over the daemon and began to pull him apart.

The daemon – cursed Reyno – screamed as the phantoms shredded him. His lingering howl lasted long after time unfroze and the gale began again.



AT DAWN, the storm passed. They rowed the longboats back the *Rumour* and the *Safire*, which had rode out the night's tumult at anchor.

As they clambered back aboard, Sesto noticed something inexplicable about Tende. The big Ebonian seemed smaller than he had before. Almost as if he had been shrunk and diminished by the sorcery he had been forced to use in order to save them.

The ships made ready to depart. Prayers and charm-offerings were made to the memory of the *Rumour*'s lost souls. Luka rowed back into the cove with jars of lamp oil, and set a torch to the wreck. As if grateful for the cleansing flames, the ship's decks combusted swiftly, and flames leapt up into the billowing yards.

'What happens now?' Sesto asked Luka.

'Now we hunt for the *Kymera*.'

'Just like that?'

'Yes, just like that.'

The *Rumour* turned north-west, the *Safire* at her heels. Behind them, in the lonely cove of Isla Verde, the *Sacramento* blazed the bright tongues of its funeral pyre up into the turquoise sky. *

TALES FROM THE TEN-TAILED CAT

THE TEN-TAILED CAT IN TALBHEIM,
KNOWN THROUGHOUT THE CITY AS A
GATHERING PLACE FOR RACONTEURS
AND THE TELLERS OF TALL TALES.

THEY COME TO THE TEN-TAILED CAT FOR MANY
REASONS. SOME TO **BOAST** OF THEIR EXPLOITS, SOME
TO **AMUSE AND ENTERTAIN**,
OTHERS TO **UNBURDEN**
THEIR SOULS OR PASS ON
DIRE WARNINGS...

...AND SOME TO SEEK **REDEMPTION**
FOR A GUILTY CONSCIENCE.

A T-T-
TANKARD OF YOUR
BEST ALE PLEASE,
BARMAN.



SCRIPT: STU TAYLOR
ART: DAVID MILLIGATE
LETTERS: FIONA STEPHENSON

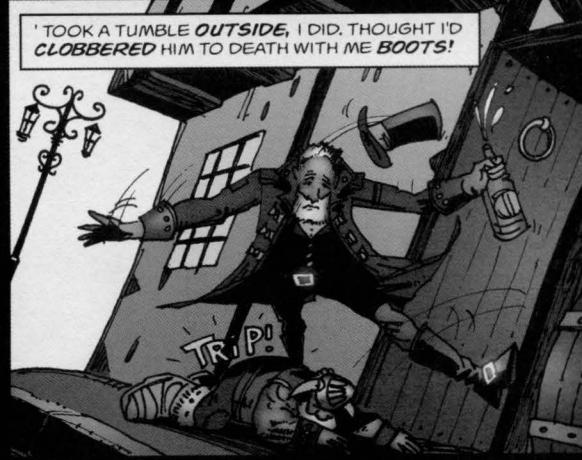
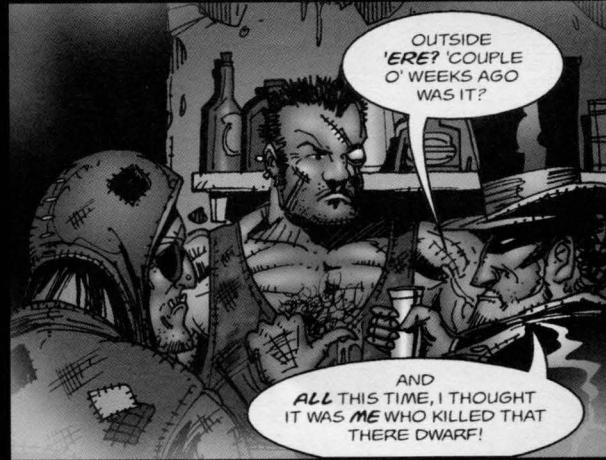


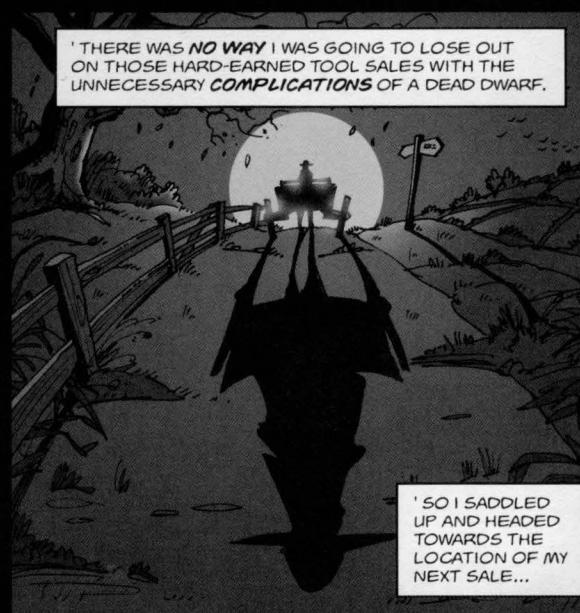
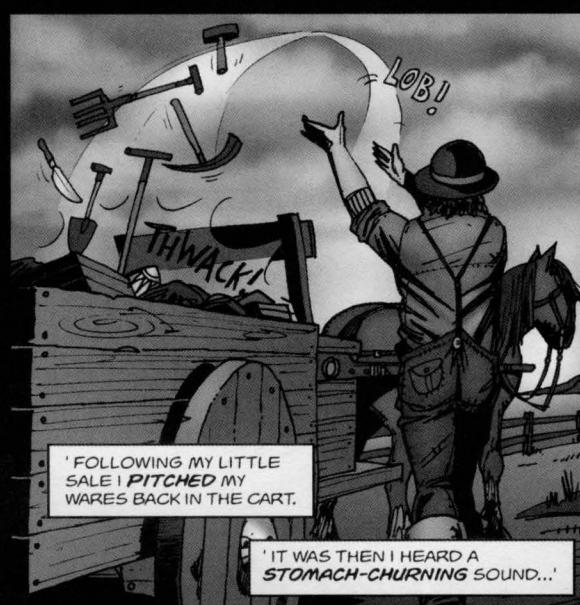
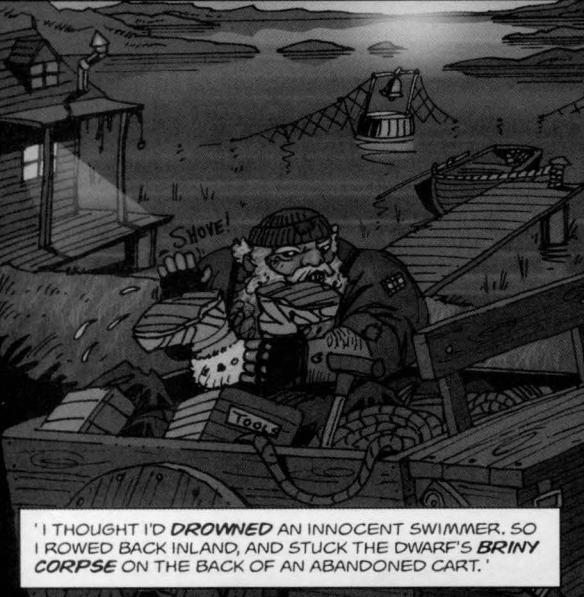
I DON'T KNOW IF YOU CAN HELP ME. YOU SEE, I THINK I KILLED SOMEONE...



'I WAS OUT HUNTING,
WHEN I SHOT WHAT I
THOUGHT WAS A STAG.
TURNED OUT TO BE
ONE OF THOSE LITTLE
BEARDED FELLA'S
INSTEAD.'





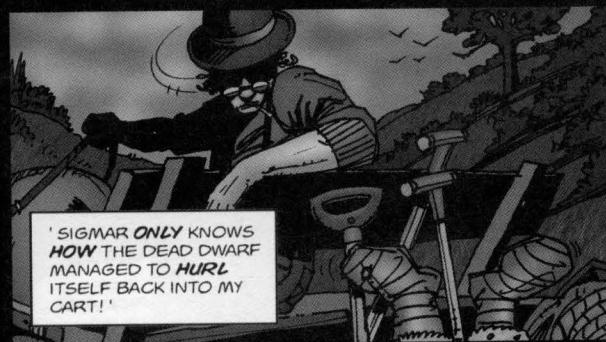


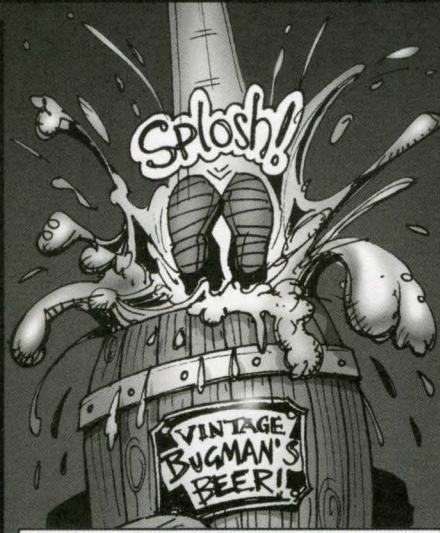
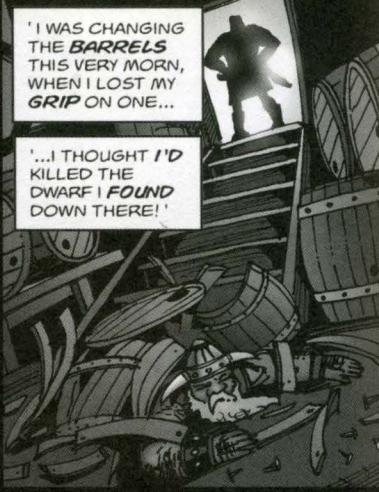
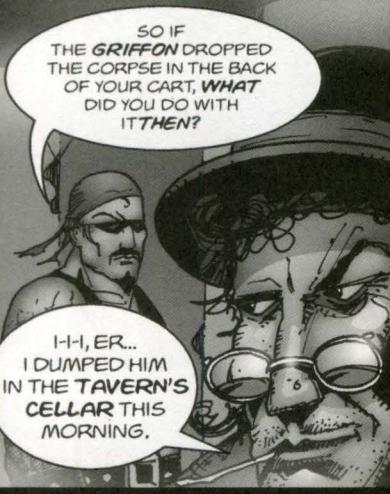
'...AND DISPOSED OF THE CORPSE
IN AN OVERGROWN THICKET.'

'OH, BUT IF THAT
HAD ONLY BEEN
THE END OF IT!'



'A WEEK LATER, ON MY RETURN JOURNEY TO TALABHEIM, AN UNWELCOME GUEST MADE A DRAMATIC RETURN!'





'I WAS NEVER SHOT BY NO POACHER! THE LAST THING I REMEMBER IS DOWNING A BARREL OR FIVE OF BUGMAN'S BEER. THEY WERE A BIT RIPE, SO I WAS FORCED TO TAKE A LIE DOWN IN THE WOODS.'

'MUST HAVE BEEN SOME VINTAGE TO KEEP ME COMATOSE THESE PAST TWO WEEKS, ESPECIALLY AFTER WHAT YOU BUNCH OF GROBI DONGLIZ PUT ME THROUGH!'



RED REWARD

BY MITCHEL SCANLON



THEY HAD COME upon the body by chance. Buried in frozen mud, it had been found by two guardsmen as they hurried to resurrect the fallen wall of a firing trench in the lull between ork attacks. But for the man whose remains now lay at their feet there would be no such resurrection. Only re-burial in some less vigorously contested section of the city, with just a battered set of dog-tags to give name to the dead.

'It is Rakale, sergeant,' Trooper Davir had said, standing over the body that was still half-concealed in the mud of the trench floor. 'Or that's what his tags say at least. Now his own mother wouldn't recognise him.'

Even from the lip of the trench wall above them, Chelkar could see what Davir meant. Rakale's face was only a memory now, his features reduced to a gruesome flattened smear marked with the striated imprint of the thing that had killed him.

'It could only have been an ork tank,' ventured the hulking guardsman to Davir's side. 'A battletruk. Look, you can see the marks of its tracks on his face. Or what's left of it. It must have rolled over the trench while Rakale lay underneath. Then the trench wall collapsed and the poor bastard was crushed. He would have seen it coming, too. A bad way to die.'

'Bad way to die, my arse,' Davir spat, flat ugly features alive with sudden anger. 'You know a good way, Bulaven? We're all poor bastards. And whether we die with throats cut, heads blown off, or crushed like Rakale here is beside the point. It's all the same in the end.'

'Phh. You feel that way about it, why don't you end it all now, you stunted idiot?' Bulaven rumbled back. 'Put yourself out of all our miseries.'

'Because, my fat friend, it is a well-known fact that the average ork couldn't hit its own arse with both hands and a guided missile. While I – as you so charmingly put it – am a "stunted idiot". A small target. One who confidently expects to outlive you all, I might add. Especially you, Bulaven. A blind man with a thrown rock and the palsy would be hard-pressed to miss your broad and capacious backside.'

'Enough,' Chelkar said, with a quiet force to let the squabbling pair know he meant it. 'I want a four-man detail to move the body and bury it by the old plasteel works. Davir Bulaven: you have both just volunteered. You may chose the others yourselves. And before I hear anyone complain about how hard the ground is, I want you to remember something: Rakale was one of our own.'

Without another word, two more guardsmen jumped into the trench to join those already there. Then, with as much reverence as was practicable given the conditions, all four set about the delicate task of extricating Rakale's remains from the mud. Occasionally a spade-head would strike a particularly hard-packed knot of earth, the impact shivering painfully up the handle to the hands of the digger. Then there might come a muffled curse, but for the most part they worked in silence. Four men, mindful of their duty to a fallen comrade and the code between all the defenders of this battle-scarred city.

We bury our dead.

But by then Chelkar had already turned away to supervise repairs to another part of the company's defences. The last attack had been a bad one. Twelve men dead – thirteen counting Rakale. And, with the remorseless logic of this place, Chelkar fully expected the next attack to be harder and more ferocious still. It was the way of things here. In the city of Broucheroc a man could rely on one thing at least: each new day would be worse than the last.

For a moment, casting tired eyes over the wearily familiar landscape around him, Chelkar found himself distracted. Before him lay no-man's-land: a great grey expanse of frozen mud and mounds of rubble, punctuated here and there by the fire-blackened silhouettes of dead ork vehicles. While behind him lay Broucheroc itself: an endless, seemingly all but abandoned cityscape of ruined and burned-out buildings. A ghost town, thought Chelkar. And we are its ghosts.

'Sergeant?'

Turning, Chelkar saw Corporal Grishen hurrying towards him from the comms-dugout, four unfamiliar guardsmen trailing in his wake like black-coated vultures. He did not need to see the crossed-swords-and-prayer-beads insignia at their collars to

know who they were: Kessrian guard. Or to know their arrival here could only mean trouble.

'What is it, Grishen?'

Plainly discomfited, as though struggling to find the words, Grishen paused before answering. Behind him, the Kessrians stood in a rigid line with hellguns held at waist-level, their safeties off. And, though not normally given to nerves, Chelkar could not help feel but a certain unease to see the muzzles of their guns seemed to be pointing his way.

'We have received a message from Sector Command, sergeant,' Grishen said, fidgeting as he spoke. 'Well, two messages actually. The first is a communiqué forwarded from General Headquarters, a thought for the day, to improve the morale of the troops. The message reads: "It is better to die for the Emperor than to live for yourself."

'I am sure the men will find that very comforting, Grishen,' Chelkar said, doing his best to keep any trace of sarcasm from creeping into his voice. 'And the second message?'

'The second message is from Commissar Valk at Sector Command,' Grishen replied, lowering his eyes as though suddenly noticing something of interest in the mud. 'It instructs that you are to be disarmed and placed under arrest on charges of heresy and treason. These men have been sent to escort you to Sector Command for interrogation. And sergeant? They have orders to shoot to kill should you try to resist.'

Yes. The guns were pointed his way all right.



HERE, IN THE rubble-strewn streets behind the front lines, amid the warrens of ruined tenements once used to house the city's workers, Chelkar could see some signs of life at least. No, life was too strong a word. There was movement: weary guardsmen huddled round braziers for warmth, militia auxiliaries dispiritedly hauling supplies,

even the occasional feral child hunting rats. But it was all no more than the last twitching spasms of a vast and dying corpse. Had every man, woman and child still alive in Broucheroc gathered in the central square, no one could have mistaken it for anything other than what it was. A gathering of the dead, like grimy-faced shades, who refused to face reality.

They were ghosts, these people. Ghosts with pulses perhaps, still able to love and laugh – even bear children – but ghosts just the same. They, and their city, lived only through some quirk of borrowed time. One day the big push would come and Broucheroc would fall. Then, whether by the orks or at their own leaders' decree, these people would go to join all those who had gone to their deaths from this city before them. Although Chelkar was forced to admit even these ghosts probably had one advantage over him. They, at least, might live to see tomorrow.

His captors had stopped short of putting his legs in irons. That was something. But Chelkar knew better than to see it as any great cause for hope. It was a practical matter. They would have to walk to Sector Command after all. And, if his escorts did not want to carry him, his legs would need to be left unfettered.

Not his hands though. There, the Kessrians had followed regulations to the letter. It was a new experience, walking these debris-choked alleyways with hands manacled behind him. Already he had suffered several bruisingly abrupt encounters with what propagandists liked to call 'the sacred ground of Broucheroc'. Enough to learn that the frozen soil was every bit as impregnable to the sudden impact of a human face as to the blade of an entrenching tool. But even the taste of his own blood, and the painful awareness that he had probably broken his nose three falls back, was not the worst of it.

Chelkar felt naked. He had been a guardsmen seventeen years, the last ten spent bottled up in this damned city by the orks. Long enough to know there was no worse way to get killed than to be wandering around unarmed in the middle of a war zone. Your gun is your life; lose one and you'll soon lose the other. It was a lesson every guardsman lived or died by. A

lesson Chelkar had learned as a snot-nosed recruit on his first day of training, courtesy of a kick up the arse from his drill instructor's boot by way of emphasis. A kick that had probably saved his life a hundred times since. In the last seventeen years, whether he ate, slept, washed – even in the latrines – his shotgun, hellpistol and knife had been his constant companions. Now, without them, Chelkar knew what it was to lose a limb. He felt a sense of incompleteness, a phantom itch, impossible to scratch.

'Get up, damn you!' one of the Kessrians barked, hauling Chelkar painfully up by the arms in the wake of yet another fall. 'And next time, be more careful where you put your feet,' he added, apparently convinced this constant headbutting of the ground could only be some act of ill-conceived defiance.

Other than that, and the occasional sharp dig of a gun muzzle against his back, his escorts seemed disinclined to converse. What contact Chelkar had had with Kessrians in the past convinced him this was more blessing than curse. They were humourless fanatics, dour even by the standards of Broucheroc – where to live at all was to live with the threatening weight of despair constantly at your shoulder. Some men succumbed to it, ending their days with the barrel of their own lasguns clenched between their teeth. Others sought refuge in false hopes, gallows humour, or a simple dogged refusal to die. But not the Kessrians. They were devoted to the Imperial Creed, and lived with all the mean smugness of men who believed they need only follow orders and, come death, they would sit with their Emperor in paradise.

Though perhaps there was a subtle wisdom in their piety. Counted the most loyal troops in all Broucheroc they had been detached to permanent service to the city's commissars, while more 'suspect' troops, like Chelkar and his men, suffered the brunt of the fighting. Still, their silence was a mercy. He might have to endure the Kessrians taking him to the gallows, but he saw no good reason why they should be allowed to try and bore him to death first.

'Keep close,' a Kessian said. 'If you run, we will shoot.'

For a moment Chelkar wondered why the man thought it necessary to state the obvious. Then, even with his nose broken, he could smell the stench of burning ork flesh and knew the corpse-pyres were close. They turned a corner, heading up towards a low hill whose summit was shrouded in an acrid haze of smoke. But he did not need to see through it to know what they would find at the top. The corpse-pyres: great burning mounds of dead greenskin bodies dragged here from every corner of the city. Through the smog Chelkar could see the outlines of perhaps half-a-dozen such pyres, each containing a hundred alien corpses or more. And for every mound he could see, a dozen other pyres might be hidden in the smoke. As many as ten thousand orks might lie burning here, but they were no more than drops in the ocean. For every ork on that hill, a thousand more waited outside the city.

Once this would have smelt like victory to me, Chelkar thought. I am past such delusions now.

It was a tradition started in the first days of the siege. Every morning guardsmen armed with long hooks would collect the orks killed in the previous day's fighting, drag them up the hill, stack them in great mounds, douse them in promethium, then set them alight. At first, it had been done to prevent disease: this city manufactured so many corpses that they could not all be left to rot in the streets. Then someone – a commissar, most likely – had proclaimed the corpse-pyres were more than just an act of hygiene. Broucheroc was sacred ground, he said, sanctified by the blood of all the heroes who had died defending it. And to bury even a single alien here would be to dishonour that sacrifice. Only heroes were worthy to be buried in Broucheroc; the bodies of the alien scum must always be burned, both to preserve this sacred soil from their taint, and so the orks outside the city would see the smoke rising on the wind and know what awaited them.

So went the dogma, anyway. Chelkar could not help but reflect how ten years of corpse-burnings had done little to dissuade the orks thus far. But there was a certain symmetry to it. Broucheroc had once been one huge refinery, where crude from the oilfields further south was brought to be

refined into fuel. Even now, the city sat on billions of barrels' worth of promethium in massive underground storage tanks. That was why the orks were here: without fuel to feed their armour, their assault elsewhere on the planet had been brought grinding to a halt. They were here for the promethium. And, thanks to the inspiration of some long-dead commissar, every ork that died here got some small taste of the stuff.

They were at the summit now, the air about them thick with smoke and drifting fragments of ash. Eyes watering, almost retching from the stench, Chelkar could see ghostly figures moving through the haze, as masked guardsmen worked to add more orks to the fires. The heat was stifling; he was sweating under his greatcoat. Here, in the warmest spot in all of Broucheroc, the city seemed even more like hell. Then he felt a stern hand suddenly grip his shoulder, as though his escorts were afraid they might lose him. But they were wrong to think he might run. Where could he go? Between Broucheroc and the orks, there was no escape.

For better or worse, Chelkar would have to put his faith in Imperial justice.



HE WAS COVERED in bruises and every part of his body ached. On arrival at Sector Command, Chelkar had been delivered to the custody of two new guardsmen who had promptly taken him to a cell, stripped him naked, then beaten him bloody with fist and club. Softening him up, they called it. Groin, stomach, kidneys – especially his kidneys – they had done their work so well Chelkar had no doubt he would be in tremendous pain for a week. Always assuming they let him live that long.

Now, he lay prone on the stone floor of another room, waiting for Commissar Valk to acknowledge his existence. A thin man, with thin lips and nose, the commissar sat at a desk at the other end of the room, eyes glued to the display screen of the data-slate he held in his long thin hands. Silent minutes passed as the commissar kept

reading. Then, without raising his eyes from the screen he spoke in a voice every bit as thin as his lips and nose and hands.

'Bring the prisoner a chair.'

The guards complied, dragging a chair to the middle of the room, propping Chelkar up in it with a hand on each shoulder. But still, the commissar did not so much as glance his way. Instead, keeping his eyes on the data-slate, he leant back in his chair and began to read aloud.

'Eugin Chelkar. Sergeant, 902nd Vardan Rifles, with service in the Mursk Campaign, Bandar Majoris, the Solnar Restoration and, most recently, Broucheroc. Decorated six times, including the Emperor's Star with Galaxy Cluster, presented for extraordinary bravery in the face of the enemy. Though never convicted, you have also faced disciplinary proceedings six times in the past on charges ranging from insubordination to failure to salute an officer. You would seem a remarkable study in contrasts, sergeant. I wonder, which is the real Eugin Chelkar: the hero or the malcontent?'

With that, Valk finally looked his way. But Chelkar stayed silent. The time for expressions of love and loyalty to the Emperor would come later. For now, better to hold his peace until he knew the substance of the charges against him.

For a moment, the commissar stared at him with cold piercing eyes, the smallest touch of a graveyard smile twitching at the corners of his lips. Valk turned away then pulled open the bottom drawer of his desk. He lifted out a vox-recorder. Setting it on his desk, Valk fussed for long seconds, ensuring the recording spools were aligned and the long wire of the vox-receiver properly connected. Then, pressing a stud to set the device working, he turned back to Chelkar once more.

'There now, sergeant, I see no reason to delay the start of these proceedings any further. Speaking clearly, and being careful not to leave anything out, I want you to tell me all about your dealings with one Lieutenant Lorannus...'



CHELKAR SLEPT A deep and even sleep. A sleep untouched by dream or nightmare. He slept, cocooned in blessed moments of peace. Then, he heard Corporal Grishen's urgent voice in his ear and knew his sleep was done.

'Sergeant! A message from Sector Command! Auspex has picked up an object falling to earth in the north-west quadrant of the sky. A drop-pod, sir!'

With a start Chelkar awoke to the darkness of the barracks dugout, Grishen's voice buzzing insistently in his comm-link's earpiece. He dragged himself from his bunk, then, after grabbing his shotgun, helmet and greatcoat, he stepped blinking into the grey light of dawn outside.

Although still half-asleep, what came next was second nature. Half-crouched, keeping to cover as best he could, he ran zig-zag across the open ground between the dugout and the forwardmost trench. Upon reaching the safety of the trench, he found Davir and Bulaven waiting within.

'I don't see anything,' Bulaven said, squinting up at the sky.

'The pod is still too far away, pigbrain,' Davir replied, perched on a stack of empty ammunition boxes. 'And anyway, the corporal said north-west quadrant: you are looking at the wrong part of the sky.'

Bulaven made some unpleasant comment about Davir's parentage, but Chelkar ignored them. Had he even wanted to follow the progress of yet another of their endless disputes, now was not the time. Not with Grishen's excited tones still pulsing in his ear.

'It is one of ours, sergeant – Command is sure of it! We are awaiting verification as to its contents, but auspex has it on a vertical bearing of forty-nine degrees – I say four-nine-degrees. You should be able to see it soon.'

Raising his field glasses, Chelkar scanned the foreboding heavens. There. He saw it. A black speck, haloed by flame. A drop-pod, all right. And it was headed their way.

'Perhaps it is a relief force,' Bulaven said, his usually booming voice now an awed whisper. 'A space-born assault, to destroy the orks and break the siege.'

'With a single drop-pod?' Davir sneered. 'I find such stupidity surprising even from you, Bulaven. Most likely some distant bureaucrat has decided to send us a supply pod to reassure us we have not been forgotten. Something remarkably useless no doubt: insect repellent, or paperclips. Remember when they sent us a whole drop-pod full of prophylactics? I never could decide whether they wanted us to use them as barrage balloons, or simply thought the orks must have a morbid fear of rubber. Still, whatever is inside this one, I shall be content so long as the bastards have aimed it right and it doesn't land on top of us.'

The pod was closer now and visible to the naked eye. With a tail of fire streaming behind it, it looked like a comet. Glancing at the network of trenches and foxholes around him, Chelkar could see dozens of fur-shrouded helmets peering over parapets as every man in the company craned their heads up towards the sky. Every one seeing in this man-made comet some different portent, whether for good or ill. All but Chelkar. He had lost his faith in portents some time back.

'You are an evil runt, Davir,' Bulaven growled petulantly. 'It would kill you, wouldn't it, to leave a man's hopes intact?'

'I'm doing you a favour, Bulaven,' Davir shrugged. 'Hope is a bitch with bloody claws. Still, if you must hope for something, hope the greenskins never develop a fatseeking missile. If they do, you're f—'

'Sergeant! We have verification!' screeched Grishen in his ear, so excited now the top end of his voice became a squealing squall of static. 'They're reinforcements! Command says the drop-pod is full of troops!'

'Thank Command for the good news, Grishen,' Chelkar said into his comm-link mouthpiece. 'But advise them they may wish to post more men on gravedigging detail. The pod looks set to land smack in the middle of no-man's-land.'

The pod fell closer, and with every metre a roar grew louder. It was big now, so big Chelkar could pick out the design of the Imperial Eagle embossed on its side. An eagle wreathed in flames, and about to land right under the ork guns.

'Take cover!' he screamed.

There came a deafening boom and the whoosh of air as the shockwave passed overhead. The ground quaked. As the tremors subsided, Chelkar stuck his head back over the parapet. He saw no sign of casualties among his men. The pod has landed so far away the tidal wave of uprooted earth and stone had fallen short of their lines. Ahead, Chelkar could see it half-buried in a newly-created crater, steam rising from the rapidly cooling hull. For a moment there was silence, the air itself seemingly as frozen as the ground underfoot. Then, the orks opened up with everything they had, and the apocalypse began.

Bullets, rockets, shells – even the occasional energy beam – fell roaring all about the pod, turning the ground around it into a churning sea of leaping soil. As ever, ork marksmanship was appalling, so far they had not even come close to hitting their target. But given the sheer volume of fire, it was only a matter of time.

'Sergeant!' Grishen screamed through the static. 'I have Battery Command on the line. Permission to request artillery counterfire?'

'Negative, Grishen. Their marksmanship is every bit as bad as the orks. We must give those poor bastards out there a chance at least. I want you to take a range estimation on the centre of no-man's-land and await my instructions.'

Out in no-man's-land, the pod doors opened, disgorging shaken guardsmen. Seemingly leaderless, confused to find themselves delivered into the middle of a firefight, they milled uncertainly in the shadow of the pod, heads moving as hundreds of eyes scanned hopelessly in search of more permanent refuge. And, though Chelkar had long since come to believe the absurdities of this city could no longer surprise him, even he was taken aback by the sight of the new arrivals' uniforms.

'There must be a shortage of paperclips and prophylactics,' Davir said. 'Now they are sending us painted lambs to the slaughter.'

They looked like toy soldiers. Several hundred guardsmen standing all but doomed in the middle of no-man's-land, each wearing a powder blue monstrosity of a uniform, festooned with a dazzling array of gold braids and epaulettes, and topped with a tall pillbox hat bearing what appeared to be a feather. Toy soldiers, delivered into the most coverless section of no-man's-land: an empty wasteland that, for them, might as well have been in hell. Still, toy soldiers or not, Chelkar could only hope they knew how to run.

'Targeteer makes the range six hundred metres, sergeant. Awaiting your instructions.'

'Keep the line to Battery Command open, Grishen. At the command *mark* I want you to give them that range and tell them to hit it with everything they've got. Confirm.'

'Six hundred metres, sergeant. With everything they've got. At the command *mark*.'

'All other troops: at the command *fire* I want suppression fire aimed at the ork lines. You have my command. Fire!'

From every foxhole and trench, the company opened up with lasgun, missile and mortar. At this range the chances of hitting anything were slim, but all Chelkar wanted was to encourage the orks to keep their heads down long enough for the new arrivals to escape. The only problem was, so far the toy soldiers showed no sign of moving.

A shell rebounded off the hull of the pod as the ork gunners finally found their range. Seeing two of their own cut down by shrapnel, the toy soldiers finally seemed to get the message. They began to run towards the human lines, legs carrying them with a speed born of desperation as bullets and shells flew all around them. Six hundred metres to go, and men fell and died in great waves, bodies pierced by shrapnel and bullets, or else just ripped to bloody pieces by blasts. Four hundred metres now, and already more than half were dead.

'Give me smoke!' Chelkar yelled into his comm-link. 'I want smoke now!'

In answer there came a flurry of grenades and mortar fire. And, in seconds, all Chelkar could see before him was a drifting

white wall of smoke. A desperate gambit. If the toy soldiers could reach cover of the smoke they might survive. But the same smoke cloud could offer cover to the orks as well.

'Sergeant, auspex reads movement in the ork lines. They are advancing into no-man's-land! The line to Battery Command is open and ready, sergeant, let me give the order!'

'You have your instructions, Grishen. Wait.'

There. Finally. He could see human figures emerging through the fog of smoke. Five. Six. Eight. Perhaps no more than two-dozen men left from hundreds, stumbling gratefully to safety at last.

'Sergeant! Auspex reads a large ork force moving towards us on foot! You must let me order the bombardment! There are thousands—'

Chelkar was about to give the order, his lips moving to frame the words, when he saw something that set him cursing in disbelief. There, amid the smoke, he saw the figure of a single remaining soldier. A last straggler who, spurning the chance to run for cover, turned instead to fire his laspistol towards the unseen horde of approaching orks hidden somewhere in the smoke cloud behind him. A fool, who probably deserved everything that was coming.

'You have my command, Grishen!' Chelkar yelled, already out of the trench and running. 'Mark!'

Half a dozen footsteps, and already in the distant air above him the screaming of falling shells could be heard. A dozen, two-dozen steps, and the screaming grew louder. Reaching the straggler Chelkar grabbed him by the scruff of the neck, giving him a swift kick in the backside by way of persuasion. Then, dragging his gasping cargo back to the parapet, Chelkar threw him into the trench and leapt down on top of him just as the first of the screaming shells began its final death dive shriek. A shriek that reached its crescendo in a sudden cacophony of explosions that set the ground shaking.

Now, thought Chelkar, hugging the straggler to him at the floor of the trench, assuming the barrage does not fall short,

we may just survive this. And, if we do, it will be my great pleasure to kick this stupid bastard in the arse again.

For long minutes the bombardment continued, close enough to send clods of frozen earth falling into the trench. An eternity of ragged heartbeats and racing pulses. Then, abruptly, the explosions stopped.

Within an instant, Chelkar was on his feet, scanning no-man's-land for orks. The barrage had blown away the last of the smoke and he saw the normally grey landscape was now painted with dark green blood and body parts. It made a pleasing contrast. Their luck had held and the artillery had seen off the attack.

'Sergeant, it's Corporal Grishen,' Davir said, stubby fingers fiddling at the comm-link in his ear as Chelkar realised he had lost his own comm-link somewhere in no-man's-land. 'Lookouts report the ork survivors have returned to their lines. Also, we have received orders from Sector Command as to the disposition of the new troops – they are to be attached to our company. And, sergeant? Grishen says according to Command we should find our new company commander among the reinforcements – a Lieutenant Lorannus.'

'Thank Grishen for the news, Davir,' said Chelkar. 'But tell him he may want to advise Sector Command our new company commander is probably lying dead with the majority of his men out there in no-man's-land.'

'Not at all, sergeant,' said a new voice from behind him. 'I assure you: your new company commander is still very much alive.'

Turning, Chelkar saw the straggler getting to his feet. And, now he had the chance to see the man clearly, he saw that he wore a single gold bar insignia at his collar. Lieutenant's bars.

It looked like kicking him in the arse again was out of the question.

ONE BIG LINE, sergeant,' the lieutenant said, jabbing an unbending finger into the map before him. 'That is the best way to defend our position. One big line, and we will break the orks like waves against the rocks.'

Two days had passed, and Chelkar stood with Grishen and Lieutenant Lorannus in the command dugout, around a map of the company's defences. Two days, and now the unveiling of Lorannus's grand design had forced Chelkar to a re-evaluation. His new lieutenant was not just a fool. He was a madman.

'Of course, a great deal of work is required,' Lorannus continued. 'But the failings of the present system – this array of trenches and foxholes in which our men hide like so many rats – should be self-evident. If we are to break the ork resolve, we need a show of strength. We must concentrate our forces in a single great trench running the length of the sector, protected by minefields and barbed wire.'

Perhaps the lieutenant was simple-minded. It was the only explanation Chelkar could think of which made any sense. Already, two days under Lorannus's command had been enough to turn Chelkar's initial dislike of the man into deep loathing. Lorannus was a by-the-book soldier, a shrill martinet who, Chelkar was sure, would probably soil his uniform if he ever saw an ork. And that damned uniform, that was another thing again. Despite repeated urgings, Lorannus had refused to dispense with his sniper-bait uniform or even wear a greatcoat to cover it.

'Well, sergeant? You have an opinion?'

'We don't use mines any more, sir. It only encouraged the orks to take prisoners and drive them across the minefields to clear them. Then, when they ran out of prisoners, they'd use gretchin instead. Either way, minefields don't work.'

'We will use punji sticks then, sergeant. Or pitfall traps. These are just details. There is a bigger picture here.'

'Yes, sir, there is. With your permission, lieutenant, I think it is time Corporal Grishen went to see if comms has received any new messages.'



Lorannus paused, looking at Chelkar's weather-beaten face with searching eyes. Then, with a nod, he indicated Grishen should go, waiting until the corporal was out of earshot before he spoke once more.

'All right then, sergeant. We are alone. What is it you have to say?'

'Permission to speak frankly, sir?' Chelkar asked. At Lorannus's gesture he continued, choosing his words carefully. 'With all due respect, sir, wouldn't it be wiser if you waited to acclimatise yourself fully to conditions here before making wholesale changes to our defences?'

'I believe I am "acclimatised" as you put it, sergeant,' Lorannus said, looking Chelkar squarely in the eye now. 'And it is my intention these changes should be made without further delay. Should I take it you find some fault in my plans?'

'Yes, sir. Our firing trenches and foxholes are spread out for a reason, same as they are in every other sector of the city. We do it that way to catch the orks in multiple fields of fire and cut them down before they can get close. At the same time, because there isn't any one single strong point, if a trench is about to be overrun the men in it can pull back without fear of the whole line collapsing.'

'Are you telling me it is deliberate policy to give ground to the enemy?'

'We don't give them anything, lieutenant. We lend it to them just long enough for the men in the other trenches to shoot them down. Then we take it back.'

'No matter how you dress it up, sergeant, it is retreat. And retreat smacks of cowardice.'

'Call it what you want, lieutenant. This is Broucheroc, war here is not like what they tell you about in the scholarium.'

'I am well acquainted with the realities of warfare, sergeant,' Lorannus said, his face flushed and his lips tight. 'My homeworld has a martial tradition that dates back centuries. And for generations my family has committed its sons to the service of the Emperor.'

'And you have personal experience of fighting orks, sir?'

'I do not see how that is relevant,' Lorannus said. A dangerous edge had entered his voice, but this was too important for Chelkar to back down.

'You talked about "a show of strength" and "breaking the ork resolve", lieutenant? Well, there's only one way I know to break an ork's resolve and that's to kill him. As for "a show of strength", take it from me: they're stronger than we are. The one thing you don't want is to end up going hand-to-hand with an ork. Let them shoot at you all day – chances are they'll miss. But go hand-to-hand and you'll end up being fed your own liver. That's what this is all about, lieutenant. Put our men in "one big line", without multiple fields of fire and with nowhere to retreat to, and you're giving the orks the chance to get close by sheer weight of numbers. And, if you do that, you might as well give them the keys to the city right now.'

'You sound as though you are frightened of the orks, sergeant,' Lorannus said, his expression dark.

'Yes I am, lieutenant. I've always made it a policy to be terrified of anything that outnumbers me five-hundred-to-one.'

For a moment, struggling visibly to control his temper, Lorannus was silent. But Chelkar knew it was only the lull before the storm. Any second now, Lorannus would either dress him down or tell him to shut up and follow orders. Worse, he might even summon Grishen back and order Chelkar to be put under arrest for insubordination. Whatever the result, the lieutenant would have his way. Their defences would be relocated to one big line and, within a day at most, everyone in this sector would be dead. All because Command had decided to shackle them with a madman. But, no matter the folly of his plans, in the end Lorannus was the officer and Chelkar the sergeant. The lieutenant could send the whole company skipping naked towards the orks and no one would stop him. Unless...

'Sergeant! Lieutenant! You must come quickly! There's something going on over in the ork lines!'

It was Grishen, his voice over the comm-link shrill to the point of panic. An unlikely guardian angel, but for now Chelkar would take whatever he could get.

'It seems we are needed elsewhere, sergeant,' Lorannus said, placing his pillbox hat on his head and adjusting the strap under his chin. 'We shall have to postpone this matter until later. But understand: this does not end here.'

'As you say, sir,' Chelkar replied, picking up his shotgun and shucking a shell into the breech. 'This is not over.'

Lorannus turned away, moving towards the dugout exit with Chelkar two steps behind him. Then, stepping outside, Chelkar saw something which only confirmed his doubts as to the lieutenant's sanity. Incredibly, instead of running or crouching, Lorannus went marching across the open ground towards the trenches as though it were a parade ground. Bad enough to be wearing that sniper-bait uniform, thought Chelkar. But the fool doesn't even have the sense to run or keep his head down.

Not that the thought of some gretchin sniper blowing the lieutenant's fool head off caused him any great concern. But there was always the danger the damned gretch would miss and hit someone else...



YOU HEAR IT?' Grishen's voice was a dry whisper. 'That noise from the ork lines. Engines.'

The sound could be heard clearly now, drifting across no-man's-land from behind the barricades on the ork side. A growing cacophony of revving motors, grinding gears and rumbling exhausts. The sound of engines. And engines meant only one thing. Armour.

'I don't understand,' Lorannus said, staring towards the sound in utter confusion. 'Intelligence reports stated categorically the orks had exhausted their last reserves of fuel.'

'Could be they found an old promethium cache somewhere,' Chelkar said. 'Either way, it doesn't matter. The reports were wrong, lieutenant. And, from the sounds of those engines, we don't have much time to get ready.'

'Yes,' Lorannus said, 'you are right of course, sergeant. We need to make preparations.' Looking into the lieutenant's eyes, Chelkar realised the man had no idea how to proceed. Confronted with an unforeseen situation, Lorannus was floundering.

'Artillery, lieutenant,' Chelkar prompted.

'Of course,' Lorannus said, his imperious facade abruptly restored as though somewhere a distant general had flicked a switch. 'Artillery fire. Grishen, contact Battery Command and tell them I want an immediate carpet bombardment of the area directly in front of the ork lines.'

Then, as Grishen hurried towards the comms-dugout, the lieutenant turned towards Chelkar once more.

'I'm sure, like me, you believe in leading from the front, sergeant. I suggest you take up position on the east of the line, while I take the west. It would be a tragedy, after all, if either of us were to wander inadvertently into the other's "field of fire".'

Without a word, Chelkar turned and ran crouching towards the forward firing trench on his side of the defences. Inside, Davir and Bulaven were already preparing for the assault; the big man was checking the pump pressure of the heavy flamer before him, while Davir flicked the safety off his lasgun and sighted in on no-man's-land.

'I am pleased to announce we are open for business, sergeant,' Davir said, glancing over his shoulder as Chelkar jumped into the trench. 'Just in time, too. From the sounds of it, we have a busy day ahead of us.'

'Yes we have, Davir. But for now I want you both to put the camo-cover back on the flamer and keep your heads down.'

'No offence, sergeant,' Davir said as, beside him, Bulaven stared dumbly at Chelkar, 'but I have found orks rarely drop dead of their own accord. You have to shoot them first.'

'Perhaps in your close study of the orks you have also noticed they rarely do much in the way of reconnaissance before an assault,' Chelkar replied. 'If we don't shoot at them, they are likely to think this trench is empty. And, if they do, they will concentrate their attack here. Then, once

they get close enough, we will spring a surprise.'

'Not much of a surprise, sergeant,' Davir said, tigerish smile revealing a mouthful of stained and crooked teeth. 'Three men with only a shotgun, lasgun and heavy flamer between them. Still, if the orks get too close, we can always try having Bulaven fart them to death.'

Overhead, the air began to scream with the sound of shells. Grishen had called in the barrage; shrapnel and explosives turning the area in front of the ork lines into a quagmire. But it would take more than that to stop the orks from coming. The best the bombardment could do was thin out their numbers.

'Confirmation from all lookouts,' Grishen said, 'the orks are coming!'

No one with eyes or ears could miss them. From the ork lines the engine noises reached a crescendo, momentarily drowning out even the artillery barrage, as dozens of ork vehicles smashed through their own barricades and sped into no-man's-land. A motley, mechanised army of scratch-built vehicles – traks, trukks, bikes and buggies – gunned their engines forward to come roaring across the frozen mud. In seconds, they were past the limits of the bombardment, leaving a third of their number burning behind them. A third already gone, but it mattered not at all. The other two-thirds just kept on coming.

'All troops, upon my command,' Lorannus said, calm and even over the comm-link. 'Fire!'

A fusillade of missiles, lasbeams and mortar rounds hurtled into no-man's-land. Some found their marks, and more vehicles exploded. But many beams glanced off armour, missiles failed, mortar rounds fell short. The motorised horde kept coming. With grim satisfaction, Chelkar saw the bulk of them were headed his way.

'Wait,' he told the others. 'I want them close.'

The death-toll mounted as the other guardsmen continued to fire. But the remaining orks kept coming in a mad dash to be first to the slaughter. One hundred metres. Eighty. Fifty. Twenty fire metres now and closing. Twenty...

'Now,' said Chelkar.

Before the sound of the order was gone Bulaven was on his feet. Moving with a speed that belied his size he pulled the camo-cover away, his finger already on the trigger of the flamer. He fired, and an oncoming wartrak suddenly disappeared in an expanding cone of fire. It exploded, but Bulaven was already onto another target. And another, and another. One by one, speeding vehicles became fiery deathtraps for their crews, screaming orks leaping overboard as around them their comrades crashed and burned. And still Bulaven kept working the flamer, a bright finger of fire turning vehicle after vehicle into an inferno. And all the time, beside him, Chelkar and Davir worked the triggers of their own guns like madman, trying to make up for lack of numbers with sheer volume of fire. Before long, all Chelkar could see in front of the trench was a rising curtain of flame, all he could hear was the screams of orks, all he could smell was the stench of burning flesh.

He kept on firing.

'Reloading!' Bulaven yelled, as the flamer suddenly sputtered and died, his fat hands already working to attach the fuel-line to a new canister. And, with a machine-like efficiency born of long practice, Chelkar and Davir sent half a dozen frag grenades into the flames to buy Bulaven the seconds he needed. But then, they were machines.

Machines made for the killing of orks.

The flamer sputtered once more, then spat fire again, sending more orks screaming to their gods. And, even through the haze of battle, Chelkar could see his plan was working. Having concentrated their attack here, the orks had become log-jammed. Already, their assault elsewhere in the sector was faltering and guardsmen from other trenches were able to add their fire to back up Chelkar and Davir. It was the oldest tactic in Broucheroc: offer the orks an open door then slam it shut in their faces. The oldest tactic, and yet it worked every time.

Then, just as Chelkar began to think he might have survived yet another battle, he heard a message over the comm-link that made him think perhaps orks were not so gullible after all.

'Lieutenant!' Grishen's voice crackled through the static. 'Lookouts report more orks advancing towards us on foot through

no-man's-land. Sweet Emperor – their armour was only the first wave!

For a moment there was only silence over the comm-link. Then Chelkar heard Lorannus give an order of stark, staring madness.

'All troops: fix bayonets and advance into no-man's-land! You hear me? Forward, for the Emperor!'

In the trench, no one moved. Chelkar, Davir and Bulaven stood, staring at each other in disbelief. Turning to look at the other trenches, Chelkar could see they were not alone. Out of the whole company, only one man had left the safety of his trench. One man, who now charged forward single-handedly towards the army of orks hidden somewhere in the smoke. The only man who had followed the order was the man who had given it.

Lieutenant Lorannus.

Alone, while the troops he commanded stood watching him in incomprehension, Lorannus leapt out of his trench and charged into no-man's-land with bullets flying all round him. Coming to a burning wartrak, he vaulted on to its hull, pushed a dead Gretchin out of the way, then grabbed the vehicle's twin stubbers and turned them screaming on a horde of approaching orks. One man, compelled by some unknown inner daemon to an act of suicidal madness.

It was the bravest thing Chelkar had ever seen.

'What are you waiting for?' Chelkar heard himself yell over the comm-link. 'Are you going to leave him to fight the orks on his own? That's your company commander out there! Charge!'

Before he even knew what he was doing, Chelkar was on his feet with Davir and Bulaven beside him. Together, they charged into no-man's-land with guns blazing, every other man in the company close behind them. A hundred men, inspired to the same madness as their commander, charging screaming to certain death.

Then, for the second time in a day, Chelkar saw something incredible.

The orks broke and ran.

Barely believing they were still alive, Chelkar and the others halted, looking at the backs of the retreating orks in dumb disbelief. Then, there came the sound of a single voice, soon joined by another, and another, until every man in the company – Chelkar included – was cheering Lieutenant Lorannus's name. And, from his vantage above them on the burning hull of the wartrak, Lorannus smiled and raised his laspistol above his head in a salute of triumph.

Then the bullet struck.

Somewhere out in no-man's-land a gretchin sniper found his spiteful mark, the impact pitching Lorannus forward off the wartrak as a fist-sized spray of red gore erupted from the right side of his chest. Chelkar was by his side in seconds, his hands desperately trying to stem the flow of blood from the lieutenant's chest as he screamed for a medic.

'Tell them...,' Lorannus gasped, blood bubbling from his mouth with every ragged breath, 'tell them... it wasn't true. My family... we were loyal... tell them...'

'You will tell them yourself, lieutenant,' Chelkar said, not realising he was shouting. 'And you can show them the medal you're going to get for this. And not posthumously, lieutenant. You hear me? This is no more than a scratch – in a couple of weeks you'll be saluting when they pin that medal on you! Do you hear me, lieutenant?'

But his only answer came with a bloody-lipped and enigmatic smile.

Lorannus was already dead.



HE HAD EXPECTED questions, or another beating, but having finished his story Chelkar found himself left in silence as the commissar's attention returned to his data-slate once more. Minutes passed, the only sound in the room was the quiet whirring of the vox-recorder and the scratching of a stylus as the commissar began to write something on the screen of the data-slate. Or perhaps it was hours: Chelkar could

not be sure. He could only sit there, wondering. Surely, there must be more to it than this? If the commissar only wanted to ask him about Lorannus's heroism, why put him through this torment? Why the arrest? The beating? Why bring him here at all?

Then, Valk switched off the vox-recorder, the sudden click sounding like a gunshot after so long a silence.

'You may go, sergeant,' the commissar said. Then, seeing Chelkar staring blankly at him, he continued. 'Having read your most recent battle-report, I was understandably concerned to see you had recommended a traitor for posthumous commendation. But having heard your account first-hand, I can see you had no sinister motive. It was simply a regrettable lack of judgement. I am satisfied you were an innocent in this affair. As I said, sergeant, you may go.'

Still shell-shocked, Chelkar stood and turned to leave, still half-expecting the guards to drag him back into the chair at any moment. Then, as he reached the door, he could not help but give one last look at the commissar sitting at his desk.

'Is there something else, sergeant?'

'Forgive my asking, commissar. But when you said "a traitor", did you mean Lieutenant Lorannus?'

'Yes. Some months ago a member of the lieutenant's family – a distant cousin, I believe – was denounced as a traitor to the Imperium. Of course, as is usual in these cases, his relatives were also purged. All except your lieutenant. Apparently some administrative oversight led to the order for his execution being delayed long enough for him to seek refuge among troops bound for this planet. No doubt he hoped to spread heresy and dissent here, but on this occasion it would seem the orks have actually done us a service. If nothing else, they have saved us a bullet at least...'



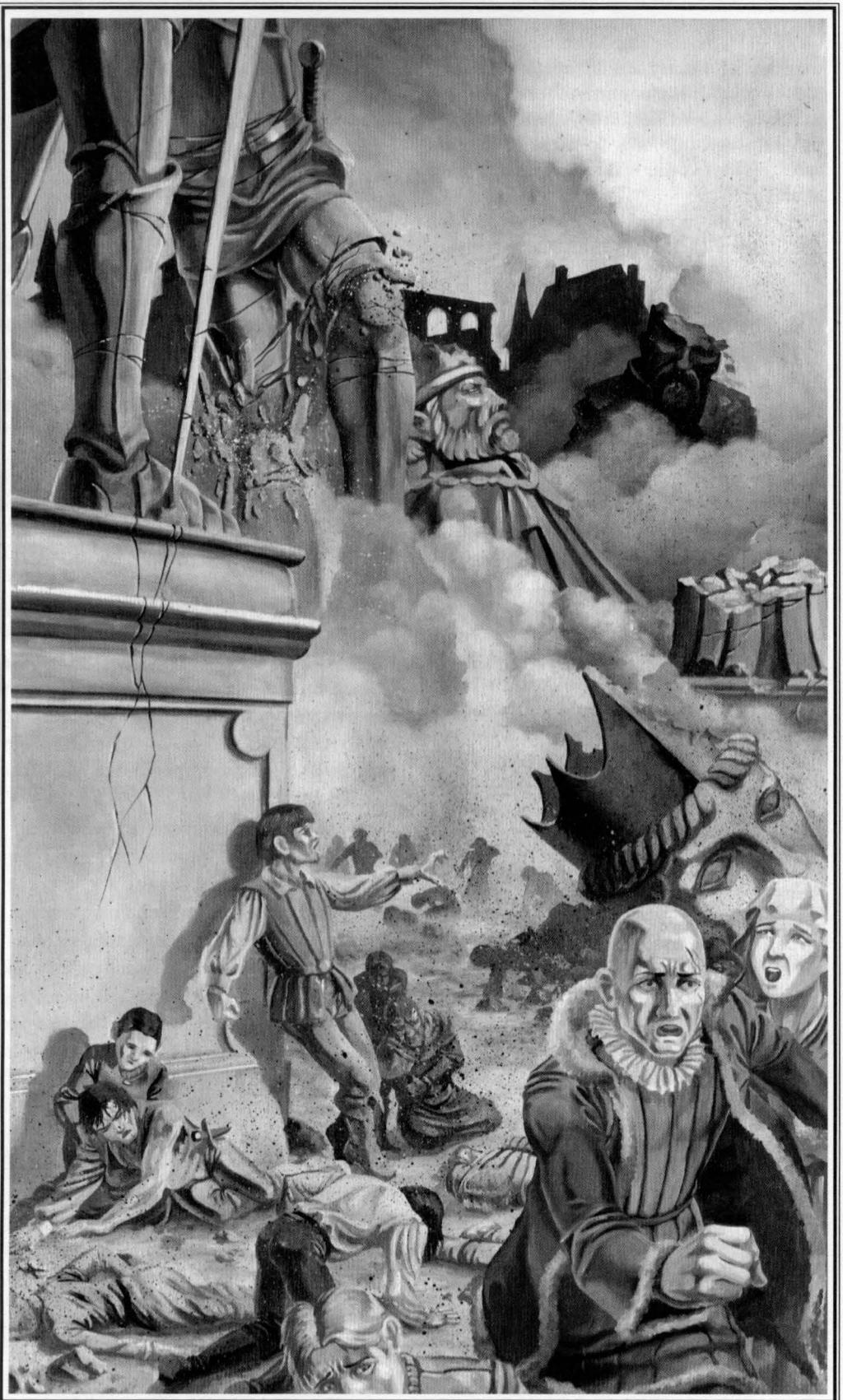
THEY HAD GIVEN him his clothes back. And his weapons. But all the same, as he limped alone back to the front lines, Chelkar felt little sense of triumph. Even cheating the gallows seemed no great victory. This was Broucheroc. At best he had lived to die another day.

Still, he had received better than Lieutenant Lorannus. It seemed strange, how he had gone so quickly from loathing the man to respecting him. And now? Now they said the lieutenant was a traitor? Chelkar was too tired to think about it. Perhaps he would consider it tomorrow.

He smelt a familiar stench on the wind and Chelkar realised he was approaching the corpse-pyres once more. For a moment he contemplated going the long way round, but his body ached and it would have added another two kilometres to his journey. Besides, the pyres seemed to have burned down now, most of them little more than smouldering piles of ash. Of course new pyres were already being built; in Broucheroc, corpses were never in short supply. But, for now, the smoke and stink had lessened.

It was then, as he made his way past a newly-constructed mound of unburned corpses, that Chelkar caught a glimpse of something. A flash of gold and blue among a mountain of green flesh. In a split second it was gone as a masked guardsman put a torch to the pyre, the whole mound disappearing in a scarlet haze of fire. But Chelkar did not need to see it twice. He knew what it was already: a golden epaulette on the shoulder of the ridiculous powder-blue uniform of Lieutenant Lorannus. Consigned to the flames with its owner, no doubt at the order of Commissar Valk. It did not matter that the lieutenant had given his life defending this city. Broucheroc was sacred soil. There could be no final resting place here for a man condemned as traitor. No hero's burial for him.

Only a red reward.



NIGHT TOO LONG

By James Wallis

TWO BEERS, Frau Kolner, and a kiss for Hexensnacht! He swooped at her, arms outstretched. She dodged around him, laughing, a tray of tankards held level with a polished skill of avoiding amorous drunks.

'Sit down, Herr Johansen, and I'll bring your ale presently.'

'And the kiss?'

'Hexensnacht's tomorrow night. And no kisses till you finish finding those poor missing women, and pay off your ale bill.' She swept away towards the bar. Johansen watched her go, then ran his hand over his short-cropped dark hair, smoothing it into place, and sat back down next to his companion, Dirk Grenner.

'She's great, isn't she?' he said.

'She's a short, penny-pinching shrew with a half-wit for a brother and a string of suitors as long as the Great North Road,' Grenner said. 'I don't understand what you see in her.'

Johansen looked across the plain wood of the inn table with incomprehension on his face. 'She's a blonde widow who owns a pub,' he said.

'So you say, too often,' Grenner said. 'The landlady of the famous Black Goat Inn. What makes you think she'd go for someone like you?'

'Me? A high-ranking officer in the prestigious Palisades, charged with protecting the Emperor and his Elector Counts?' Johansen puffed out his chest. 'I'm a fine catch.'

'You're an overworked, underpaid captain in a small division most people have never heard of. You've got a humourless tyrant for a boss—'

'A sarcastic ex-Watch sergeant for a partner,' Johansen said and reached for his tankard.

'—you don't wear a smart uniform most days, and you spend your time watching Kislevite insurrectionists or Bretonnian spies. Or, Sigmar help us, seconded to the city

Watch, who couldn't find their arses if a horse bit them.'

'They're not doing much better with our help,' Johansen said. 'Four women missing in two weeks. It's not good.'

'And while we were fooling around, Schmidt gets himself killed.'

'His own fault. He knew they suspected he was watching them.'

'Bretonnians,' Grenner said with vehemence. 'Sons of bitches. Killing him is one thing, but stuffing his mouth with his—'

'Here's to his memory,' Johnsen said. They raised their beer-mugs, drank, and were still. Grenner broke the moment.

'Still, Hexensnacht tomorrow and Hexenstag the day after. Things should be quiet. The city's practically deserted.' He pulled his tankard closer and inspected it, thinking.

A deep boom echoed from outside. The building shook, sending ripples across the beer.

'What was that?' Grenner said.

'You tempting fate,' Johansen said. 'Gunpowder. A lot of it. About half a mile.'

'Not magic?'

Johansen shook his head. 'No, the echoes were wrong. Come on.' He was on his feet. Grenner stood up, staggered and leaned on the table. 'Are you sure we're on duty?' he asked.

'We're always on duty,' Johansen reminded him.

'I'm too drunk to be on duty,' Grenner protested.

'Dunk your head in the horse-trough,' Johansen said.

They staggered to the door. Outside, flames lit the night sky above the wide empty space of the Königplatz. Altdorf, capital of the Empire, lay still and cold under a blanket of thin snow and stars, the streets lightened by the eerie light of the two moons, one crescent and the other a day from full. Tomorrow would be Hexensnacht, witches' night, the last night of the year.

THE SEVEN STARS Inn was ruined and ablaze. The fire raged against the cold, its leaping heat forcing back the crowd of gawping citizens. Stirrup-pumps forced futile jets of water into the inferno and nearby buildings were being emptied in case the flames spread.

Grenner gazed at the blaze. Almost nothing was left except the ground floor. Nobody could have escaped this cataclysm, but he couldn't work out why someone would blow up a prosperous merchant-inn at one of the few times of the year when it was almost empty.

He saw Johansen moving through the crowd, circling the building. The man had studied pyrotechnics when he was in the army; he'd be able to tell where the charge had been set and how large it was. Grenner's speciality was less technical and more dangerous. He was a student of human nature.

'So, Grenner, what's the situation?' The voice jolted him from his thoughts, made abrupt by its strong northern accent. Grenner didn't have to turn to know General Hoffmann, the leader of the Palisades and the only man whose orders he respected, had arrived.

'Probably nine dead, sir,' he said. 'No survivors found so far, nor witnesses. No reports of threats or recent trouble.'

'A hundred and fifty pounds of gunpowder in the cellar,' Johansen added as he joined them. 'Blast went straight up, killing everyone inside. Very effective. Good evening sir, you're up late.'

'Hard to sleep with so many disturbances,' Hoffmann said, his eyes dark against the flames.

'Don't give us that,' said Grenner. 'Something's up or you wouldn't be here. Why this inn, and why tonight?'

Hoffmann held his stare for a moment. 'You're on the ball for a man who's been drinking all evening, Grenner. Yes, this is no routine tavern-bombing. Grand Prince Valmir von Raukov, Elector Count of Ostland, is known to share a room with a female associate here late at night. We've warned him it's a security risk, but...'

'Was he inside?' Johansen wanted to know.

'He was but he left earlier, luckily for us. Someone just tried to kill a senior officer of the Empire, and in a very public way. I need to know who and why, and I need them stopped. Your job.'

Johansen looked mock-aghast, Grenner dismayed. 'Can't you put someone else on it?' he said.

'There isn't anybody else. It's almost Hexenstag. Everyone's out of the city or on leave, except the Meer twins who are working incognito and Schmidt, who I don't need to remind you is dead. Get to work.'

'We'll start first thing,' Grenner said.

Hoffmann's face was in shadow, the raging fire behind him. 'Someone's trying to kill an Elector, you don't wait till morning. Start now, and don't stop till their bodies are in jail or cold.'

Johansen groaned. 'When do we sleep?'

'Perhaps the explosion deafened your ears.' The general's voice was ice. 'You don't stop until they're jailed or dead.'

Chains of people passed buckets of water to watchmen who flung them at the burning inn. The inferno consumed the water and blazed on, turning the sky above the city red.



THE KÖNIGPLATZ is the wide market-square separating the University of Altdorf from the merchant district. By day it is crowded with traders, peddlers, goodwives looking for a bargain, street-thieves looking for unguarded purses, pilgrims, soldiers and messengers, gawkers staring at the huge statues of past emperors that dominate the square with the hundred foot-tall figure of Sigmar, the founder and patron of the Empire, towering over them.

By night the square is quieter, the market-barrows left stacked and bare at the side of the cobbles. On cold nights between the midwinter feasts of Mondstille and Hexenstag, when the river Reik flows through the city slow and sluggish like thick blood in the veins of old tramps huddled in warehouse doors, Altdorf's streets are deserted apart from a few drunken revellers, a few Watch patrols, those who prefer not to go home or who have no homes, stray dogs, and rats scurrying in the garbage. Those with more clandestine business stick to less well-lit areas.

'Gunpowder in the cellar,' Grenner said as they headed across the square towards the Black Goat. 'How did it get there?'

'Probably a barrel,' said Johansen. 'Who'd notice an extra barrel in a beer-cellar?'

'The cellarman would. And they'd have to get it down there. First thing, we check out the Seven Star's regular brewers, wine-sellers, anyone who might supply them with casks. Find witnesses. Find out who's got a grievance against the prince.'

'A lot of work,' Johansen said, 'for just two of us.'

Grenner groaned. 'I know. And I've got a fitting at my tailor.'

'Oh yes?'

'Couple of shirts and a new short-cloak. Dark blue, Tilean style.'

'Very nice. Big evening?'

Grenner gave him a scathing look. 'Hexensnacht. In case you'd forgotten.'

'Oh yes. Let's hope we're done by then.' Johansen, distracted, glanced across the empty square. 'Wait, what's that?' He pointed into the maze of shadows among the bases of the emperors' statues.

It was a pile of displaced paving-stones, the bare earth beside them rude and frosted. Grenner and Johansen regarded them.

'Odd,' Johansen said. 'I didn't see that earlier.'

'Maybe you weren't looking. Maybe it wasn't here. We can check on it in the morning.'

Johansen looked up as if realising where he was for the first time. 'Why are we back here?'

'Because we need to do some planning. And the best place for that is over a mug of mulled wine, with the chance Frau Kolner's still around to bring it to you.'

Johansen grinned. 'Let's get planning.'



IT WAS A long night. For an hour they talked and thought and speculated over hot wine brought by Frau Kolner's idiot brother who was less interesting to look at than the landlady, but who understood instructions and did not sleep. Then they left the inn again, into the biting cold of the night to bang on the doors of informants, rousing them to answer questions in exchange for a few silver coins, a promise of future favours, leniency for relatives or associates in jail, or a

stare that said nothing but threatened much. Grenner did the talking. Johansen stifled yawns, fingered his sword and blocked the escape routes.

As six bells sounded across the city, the sky still dark, they found themselves in the merchant district a few streets away from the Königplatz, hammering on a door that didn't respond. Johansen looked at Grenner.

'Probably spending Hexenstag in the country,' he said.

'Wish I was.' Grenner gave the door a kick and stepped away. 'Enough for now. Breakfast at the Goat?'

'You're on.' They began to walk back to the square, Grenner slapping his hands to ward off the frost.

'And what has this wasted night taught us?' he said, only partly to his partner. 'That the prince has a lot of enemies. The Bretonnians and Kislevites hate him because of his trade-treaties with Norsca, his neighbours in the north hate him because his army drove a greenskin force into their lands last year, the Chaos-worshippers hate him because the witch-hunters run freely in his province, and even his own people hate him because he left the church of Ulric and became a Sigmarite. All of which we already knew. None of them have agents working in the city, as far as we know, and he's not annoyed anyone for at least two months. We have nothing.'

'Perhaps he wasn't the target after all,' Johansen said.

Grenner looked at him with eyes smarting from the cold. 'If he wasn't then it stops being our problem.'

'He left the inn. Perhaps he was in on the scheme.' Johansen paused, peering ahead. 'Hang on. They've started early.'

In the Königplatz market-traders were setting out their stalls, but Johansen's attention was on the crew of workmen among the emperors' statues at the centre of the square. He tapped Grenner on the shoulder, but Grenner was looking elsewhere.

'You go. Shout if you need help,' he said and walked away. Johansen shrugged, rubbed tiredness from his eyes and walked across to the crew of masons and apprentices, working with shovels and picks, digging a trench among the forest of plinths. One stopped and watched him approach, arms folded, his thin red hair a dash of colour

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against his sombre clothes and the dullness of the morning.

'Cold day for working,' Johansen said, raising a hand in greeting. 'You the foreman?'

The man nodded, lips tight and eyes guarded.

'You're starting early,' Johansen said.

'Aye.' The mason's northern accent was thick as porridge. 'Work's got to be done by t'night.'

Johansen nodded, looking at the work crew. 'Are all your men members of the stonemasons' guild?' he asked. 'They don't like it when—'

'Affiliate members. From Wolfenburg,' the foreman said. 'It's rush work. Base subsidence. No local masons to do it.'

'You've got a guild certificate?'

'Not here.' The foreman turned his head, his eyes suspicious. 'Who's asking? Are you from the masons? Checking on us?'

'Just a concerned citizen,' Johansen said, and walked across the square to where Grenner was.



GRENNER RAPPED the side of the cask on the cart. 'All the way from Bretonnia?' he asked. 'Why? We make wine in the Empire.'

The diminutive wineseller looked mock-shocked. 'Not like zis!' he exclaimed. 'Zis, she is grown under zer sun of Bordedeaux, the vines viz no frost, no fungus – ze finest wine, rich and complex, a subtle bouquet viz afternotes of cherries and oak...'

Grenner held up a hand to stop him. 'I meant transport's expensive. How can you make money on one cartload?'

The Bretonnian shook his head sadly. 'Monsieur, I do not know eizzer. My buyer, who supplies ze houses of Bretonnians in Altdorf, I find 'e is dead of the plague since four months. I cannot find my customers, so I must sell in ze market like a-a-a peddler.'

Grenner nodded, studying the casks, turning thoughts over in his mind. There had been trouble with Bretonnians the summer before, and rumours said there might be more trouble next year. Not to mention the business with Schmidt. He

thumped one of the barrels and it shook solidly. 'Open it. I want to check.'

'Check?' The merchant looked puzzled. 'Check what?'

'That there's wine inside, not something else.'

The man's eyes narrowed. 'What?'

'Just open it.'

'But zat would ruin ze wine!' The short man's hands were raised beseechingly. There was silence for a moment. 'Maybe I draw you off a cup?' he suggested.

Grenner shrugged acceptance, and the Bretonnian filled a metal beaker from the spigot at the base of the barrel. The liquid flowed deep and red. Grenner took it, sniffed and swigged, looked contemplative.

'Well?' The little man's eyebrows raised into questions.

Grenner looked at him. 'You say this is the finest wine in Bretonnia?'

'Oui, m'sieur.'

'Stick to making cheese and seducing married women. This stuff's swill.' He put down the cup, to greet Johansen as he walked over. 'You get anything?'

'Non-guild workers doing repairs.'

'Suspicious?'

Johansen scratched his unshaved chin. 'Maybe. If the work's urgent there may be no guild men available, given the time of year. But the order must have come from the city council, and the local guilds get all those contracts.'

Grenner pushed open the door of the Black Goat. 'The Königsplatz will be packed with people this evening. If the statues are unsafe and there aren't any local masons to do the work, then...' He let the sentence trail off as he slumped into a seat by his regular table. Johansen pulled out a chair and sat.

'What did you get?' he asked.

'Bretonnian with a flimsy story, selling what he said was expensive wine from a market-stall. Big barrels of the stuff.'

'Barrels, right. Did you see the wine?'

'I tried a cup. It tasted like fruity tar. Ho, Frau Kolner, how are you this morning?'

'As concerned about the size of your barbill as I was last night,' the landlady said. 'Don't settle yourselves. I have a letter for you.'

Johansen reached out but she gave it to Grenner, who smirked at his colleague as he snapped the seal and unfolded the paper.

'What is it?' Johansen asked.

'Hoffmann. He guessed we'd come back here. Breakfast is cancelled, we're to get back on the streets. Hunger sharpens the mind, he says.'

'Sarcastic old sod.'

'There's more. We report to him at noon. Alchemics should have analysed the explosion by then. And meanwhile he's got us an interview with the Elector.'

'When?'

'Now.'

'So much for your appointment with your tailor.' Johansen swiped a half-finished mug of beer from a neighbouring table and swigged it. 'Let's go.'



GRAND PRINCE Valmir von Raukov, the Elector Count of Ostland, sat upright in his four-poster bed. A tray lay beside him, hot breakfast scents rising from it: sausages and kippers. In a chair on the other side of the bed a tall man in the grand prince's house uniform sat, not saying a word, his hand never leaving the pommel of his sword.

'Can you think of anyone who'd want you dead, your Highness?' Grenner asked from where he and Johansen stood at the end of the bed. He knew how scruffy and tired they must look compared to the opulence of the prince's bedroom. They ought to be in dress uniform, scrubbed and shaved, answering questions instead of asking them.

'Of course people want me dead. I'm an Elector, for Sigmar's sake. It's not my job to be liked. You know that.' The prince regarded them from under bushy eyebrows and chewed bacon. 'No, nobody has threatened me lately beyond the usual cranks – correct, Alexis?' The man in the chair nodded, his eyes never leaving the Palisades officers.

'So you know of no reason why –'

The prince raised a hand. 'Captain, if I knew anything useful I would tell you now. I'm not oblivious to danger, I have people like Alexis who monitor my enemies' activities. If we knew anything we would tell you.'

Grenner stared ahead, but in the corner of his eye he saw Alexis move, shifting position. Perhaps, he thought, he's uncomfortable at his master's words. He wanted to ask more, but knew better than to pose heavy-handed questions of an Elector.

'Perhaps,' the prince continued, 'what you should be asking is why the Seven Stars was blown up if I wasn't there? The assassins would surely have checked I was in the building before they set the fuse.'

'Why would they have thought you would be there?' Grenner asked.

'Because that is my habit,' the prince said. 'I usually stay till morning. Last night I returned home early because I received word my wife was ill. Yet they blew up the inn all the same. Captain, either I wasn't the intended victim, or the bombers had an informant who misled them, by accident or on purpose. There's the next piece of your puzzle.'

'Thank you, your highness. We'll look into it.' Grenner felt disdain but masked it. He hated it when officials did his job for him, particularly when they did it better. 'Can you tell us who your companion was?'

The prince shrugged. 'Her privacy makes few odds now. Her name was Anastasia Kuster. I met her in the Street of a Hundred Taverns a few months ago, when I was – I was dressed plainly, let's just say that. She's an honest girl, works in a glove-shop. A little scatterbrained but works hard. She's originally from Ostland, a northerner like myself. When I'm in Altdorf we meet once or twice a week.'

'Might your wife have had something to do with the explosion?'

'My wife?' The prince snorted. 'If I die, she loses everything: her title, her status, her palace, her income, the lot. She's terrified by the thought of my death. Her relatives too, they all ride on my coat-tails. None of them would do anything to harm me.'

'Hell has no fury like a scorned woman,' Johansen said.

'Scorned? She doesn't love me. We married because it was politically advantageous to link our families. If I want warmth and emotion and life in a woman, I'll go to – I went to Anastasia.'

'Yet you returned home because your wife was ill,' Grenner said.

'She is heavy with my son. It would not have been seemly for the boy to be born while I was away from the house.'

'Are you sure it's a boy, your highness?' Johansen said. Grenner flinched. It was a flip remark, inappropriate and irreverent. Such things were dangerous.

The prince regarded them from under heavy brows, and did not smile. 'It had better be.' His tone was cold.

Grenner's heart dropped. Lower ranks should know their place, and Johansen's remark had crossed the line. They'd get no more useful information here. 'Thank you for your time, your highness,' he said. 'We will report anything—'

The prince's cough stopped him. 'Not so fast. I have questions too. Were any bodies recovered?'

Grenner snapped back to attention. 'No, sir. The place was an inferno. It's almost certain that everybody was cremated in seconds.'

'Not everybody,' the prince said. 'The inn's cellarman survived.'

'What?' said Grenner. 'We weren't told.'

Across the room, Alexis sat forward in his chair. 'Hans Kellerman was in the stablyard,' he said. 'The blast blew him twenty feet and broke his every bone.'

'He's alive?' Johansen asked.

'No, he died three hours later. But I was able to ask him some questions first. The Shallyan priests had given him herbs to numb the pain and he was almost coherent.'

'What did he say?'

Alexis glanced at the prince, who gave a slight nod. He turned back. 'A few things. He told me there were four other people staying in the inn, but nobody of consequence. Just before the explosion he heard someone leave the inn, but didn't see who. And one of the cellar keys had gone missing a few days earlier, and he suspected Anastasia, who had taken things bef—'

The prince coughed and Alexis stopped talking abruptly, sliding back in his chair under his master's glare. The prince turned to the Palisades officers.

'That will be all,' he said.

'Thank you for your time, your highness,' Grenner said, bowed and backed out of the room, Johansen beside him. He made sure they were twenty feet down the empty corridor before speaking. 'I hate dealing with nobs,' he said. 'Humourless sods.'

'This one not as stuck-up as most, though,' Johansen said. 'What do you reckon? Did he get his mistress up the spout, she was blackmailing him, and he hired someone to blow up the inn to get rid of her?'

'I know you can be thick as a brick sometimes,' Grenner said, 'and that may explain why you never get anywhere with Frau Kolner, but did you really not notice?'

'Notice what?'

Grenner let out a sigh. 'He didn't kill her. He was in love with her.'

'You should have pushed him for more information about the girl.'

Grenner turned on him. 'Don't tell me how to ask questions. That's my job. You almost got us thrown out of an audience with an Elector with your ridiculous...' He stopped, pressing a hand against his eyes. 'Sorry. Sorry, Karl. I didn't mean that. It's just... I'm tired and stressed.'

Johansen put a hand on his friend's shoulder. 'That goes for both of us. And it'll get worse before it gets better. Still, come midnight we'll be laughing about this and toasting the new year, eh?'

'I bloody hope so.' Grenner said dryly. 'Right. How many glove-shops are there in Altdorf?'



THREE WERE SIX, but they got lucky with the second one. Anastasia hadn't come to work that day, the glove-maker's wife told them, and hadn't sent word that she was ill. But it had happened before, and besides it was Hexensnacht, so they weren't worried. Grenner turned on his charm and got the girl's address in two minutes.

'Fast work,' Johansen observed as they left the shop.

'New personal best,' Grenner said. Inside he felt distant, distracted, as if there was a layer of wool between his thoughts and his actions. The bright cold sunlight made him feel cold, reminding him of too much beer and not enough rest the night before. His feet were heavy. He hoped there'd be no need for fast reactions or swordplay today.

The girl's lodgings were close to the city's north wall, decorated with the fripperies a rich lover buys for his fancy, or a girl not used to luxury buys for herself. Anastasia wasn't there and the bed had not been slept in. They searched the place with a swift thoroughness born of long practice.

'She was an Ulrican,' Johansen said, holding up a silver wolf-head.

'Interesting. She could read, too,' Grenner said, holding up a ragged, leather-bound book. He leafed through the pages.

'Any good?'

'Hardly Detlef Sierck. What's that?' A piece of paper fluttered down from between the pages. Grenner picked it up. 'Address.'

'One she wanted to hide.'

'Wouldn't she memorise it?'

'The prince said she was scatterbrained.'

'Oh yeah.' Grenner peered at the scrawled writing. 'It's in the docks. Warehouse district.'

'Probably a glove wholesaler, knowing your luck.'

'My luck?' Grenner looked askance. 'Explain that to me on the way there, Herr Not-been-kissed-for-a-month.'



THE WAREHOUSE on Weidendamm was old but the lock on its wide doors was new. Grenner tested its inner workings with a bent piece of metal while Johansen kept watch. Technically, as Palisades officers, they could enter and search any building, but dockers' understanding of the finer points of the law was often shockingly bad.

'So we're here because we found this address in the effects of an Elector's mistress, right?' Johansen said.

'Right.'

'Why do we think this is a good lead?'

Grenner stopped his picking and looked up. 'It's our only lead. Plus we're seeing Hoffmann in an hour and he'll want to know what we've been doing.'

'That's what I'm afraid of.'

'Shut up. I'm concentrating.'

'We could claim addled wits from lack of sleep.'

'Shut up.'

'Face it, this is half-arsed.'

Grenner stood up, put the lockpick back in his pocket, and kicked the door hard. The wood around the lock splintered and the door swung inwards.

'Subtle,' Johansen said.

'Subtlety is over-rated. Come on.'

The air inside was cold and dark and their breath hung in the faint shafts of sunlight. The floor underfoot was hard earth. A figure lay slumped and twisted a few feet in front of the door. The rest of the warehouse was bare.

Grenner went to the body. 'Girl. Twenties. Pretty. Last night's party frock. Neck broken. Want to bet she's Anastasia?'

Johansen peered at the dead girl's face. 'Does she remind you of anyone?'

'No,' Grenner said, squinting. 'Who were you thinking of?'

'I don't know.' Johansen studied the corpse for a moment, then squatted and ran his hands over the ground, gathering a thin powder onto his fingertips. He sniffed them. 'Gunpowder,' he said. 'There's the imprint of a barrel in the earth too.'

'Just one?'

Johansen blinked, letting his eyes adjust till he could make out the faint outlines on the floor. 'Eight. No, twelve. More if they were stacked.'

'How many of that size would have blown up the Seven Stars?' Grenner asked.

'Three at most.'

'Damn!' He stood and prowled. 'So... assume the prince's mistress is feeding information to the assassins. Maybe she knows their motive, probably not. Last night she has a lucky escape and realises that they'd kill her too if necessary. So she comes to confront them... why?'

'Scatterbrained,' Johansen said.

'They do kill her. So they were here between the explosion and now, probably clearing the warehouse. But we still don't know who they are.'

'My money's on Ulrican fanatics. We could look for witnesses,' Johansen suggested.

'It's the docks. Nobody ever admits seeing anything here.' Grenner thumped the wall. 'It's going to be a city records job, get a clerk to dig out the old ledgers and find who owns this place. The cargo records too, where it came from.'

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'I'm more worried about where it's gone. Cart tracks here.' Johansen pointed to the floor.

'Cart. Barrels,' Grenner said. 'You thinking what I'm thinking?'

'A good way to get gunpowder into an inn cellar. You?'

'I was thinking about a Bretonnian wineseller.'

Johansen stood, brushing dirt from his knees. 'We're late for Hoffmann. And I'm hungry for lunch.'

Grenner took a length of twine from his pocket to tie the warehouse doors shut. 'Lunch? Some of us are still starving for breakfast.'



FROM THE WINDOW of General Hoffmann's room on the top floor of the Palisades building, the thin plumes of smoke still rising from the site of the Seven Stars were faint dark columns against the cold blue sky. Hoffmann stared out over the city, his back to his two agents.

'Twelve hours,' he said, 'and all you've got for me is an empty warehouse and a dead girl.'

'An Elector's mistress. That's got to be worth something,' Grenner said.

Hoffmann shook his head. 'She can't tell us what's going on, who these people are or where they'll strike next. So who's behind this?'

'Ulrican extremists,' Johansen said.

'Bretonnians,' Grenner said.

Hoffmann turned his stare to them. 'Make your minds up,' he said. 'The city's in uproar, every noble is screaming for protection, we've got a report of skaven in the sewers, and on top of it another woman's disappeared. The last thing I need is you two following a wrong lead.' He paused. 'You do have more leads?'

The agents exchanged a tired look. 'Can you send someone to the city records office, to find out who owns that warehouse?' Grenner asked.

'And the customs records, to see if there's anything on who brought the barrels to the city,' Johansen said.

'Who do you suggest I send?' Hoffmann asked. 'There isn't anyone else. Get the records clerks to do it.'

'You think there'll be any records clerks there on Hexensnacht?'

'Then you do it. I've got my hands full.' Hoffmann turned back to the window. 'We got the explosion report from Alchemics,' he said. 'Inconclusive. The sulphur in the gunpowder was Tilean, the saltpeter was gathered near Wolfenburg and the charcoal could be from anywhere. The ingredient ratio suggests a Middenheim-trained alchemist, but that means nothing.'

'Couldn't you send someone from Alchemics to the records office?' Johansen asked.

Hoffmann snorted. 'Nobody's going to do your book-work for you. And don't dare fall asleep over them, or I'll have your guts for garters. Go on, get out.'



THE STREET OUTSIDE the Palisades was quiet. A cat padded silently down the gutter. Grenner watched it go, yawned and flexed stiff muscles.

'If we're going to the records office,' he said, 'can we go by Weberstrasse?'

'What's in Weberstrasse?'

'My tailor.'

'You and your clothes, I swear-' Johansen said, but Grenner wasn't listening. Movement had caught his eye: a laden cart moving past the end of the street. He ran after it.

He was right: it was the Bretonnian's cart, still piled high with barrels. The short man was staring straight ahead, as if deep in thought. Grenner overtook him and stood in the road, hand raised.

'Stop,' he said. 'Where are you going?'

The Bretonnian reined in his horse. 'Ah, m'sieur,' he said. 'You have come to buy some wine? Ze aftertaste of cinnamon, she has lingered on your tongue...'

'Where are you going?'

The wineseller shrugged. 'The market is finished. I go to find some taverns, maybe zey buy.'

'Where were you last night?'

'I put my cart in an alley, I sleep zere.' The little man raised his hands in supplication. 'M'sieur, I have no money. I am—'

'You're under arrest. I want you off the streets.' The Bretonnian turned white. He grabbed for his whip and swiped it across the horse's rump. It started forward, towards Grenner, who ducked sideways and groped in his jerkin for a throwing-knife. A hand landed on his arm, restraining him. He turned. It was Johansen.

'What the hell are you doing?' he asked.

'I'm arresting this man.' The cart was rattling away behind him.

'It's not him.'

'How do you know?' Grenner demanded, turning to give chase. Johansen gripped harder.

'It's not him. It's Ulrican extremists, trying to kill their Elector.'

'I think he's working with them.'

'Why?'

'Because...' The cart was gaining speed. 'Look, he's up to something or he wouldn't be running.'

'Not our problem,' Johansen said. 'Electors in peril, the safety of the Empire to protect, that's us, remember? Leave him for your friends in the Watch. Besides,' he added, 'if I was stopped by someone looking like you, I'd run too.'

'What do you mean?' Grenner ran a hand through his blond hair.

'You're unkempt. Not to mention unshaved, haggard and smelling of last night's beer.'

'Visiting my tailor would let me—'

Johansen laughed, a short humourless bark. 'Forget it. We've got records to check.'



THEY WENT TO three breweries, to ask about beer deliveries to the Seven Stars. Nobody knew about anything unusual.

They knocked on the doors of the houses around the remains of the Seven Stars to see if anyone had been awake before the explosion, or had heard or seen anything. Nobody had.

They spoke to a couple of winesellers about the Seven Stars, but the inn had only taken small casks. Grenner asked about a

Bretonnian wineseller dying of plague four months ago, but they didn't know of anyone. Grenner looked at Johansen significantly. Johansen raised his eyes to the ceiling.

They walked through the Königplatz. The market-stalls had closed up early for the day, clearing the space for the evening's celebrations. There was no sign of the stoneworkers who had been there earlier.

They went to Grenner's tailor, who fitted his new clothes and wanted to know how the search for the missing women was going. Even wearing a new shirt and stylish short-cloak, Grenner still looked unkempt and sleepless.

After several hours, after putting it off for as long as possible, they went to the city records office, in the basement of the council-hall. There was one clerk on duty, but after he showed them the section of leatherbound warehouse and tax records that they needed, he excused himself and they didn't see him again.

'Typical work-shy civil servant,' Johansen said.

'Not very civil either,' Grenner observed.

The books were cold, wide, dry and dusty. Their parchment pages were filled with tightly written records of who owned everything in Altdorf, who had sold it to them, and what percentage of the sale the tax collectors had taken. It was slow, tedious work.

Johansen yawned and picked up the fifth ledger in the pile beside him. It was hard to stay awake: the cold air and the candlelight were soporific, and outside the narrow window daylight had fled hours ago. Across the table, Grenner echoed his yawn.

'We're doing this the wrong way,' he said.

'What?'

'We're looking for where they've been. We should be working out where they're going. Who they're going to target next.'

'Oh yeah?' Johansen raised a weary eyebrow. 'How do we do that, a crystal ball? You know what Hoffmann thinks about that scryer the Watch uses.'

Grenner passed a hand over his face, trying to wipe tiredness away. 'It was just an idea.'

Footsteps weaved through the racks of records towards them. Johansen raised his head to look. It was Alexis, the prince's bodyguard.

'Sigmar's teeth, you two are hard men to track down,' he said.

Johansen thought of a snappy response, but swallowed it. It was too late and he was too tired. 'What's this about?'

Alexis leaned on the edge of the table. 'Anastasia.'

'You know we found her body?' Grenner said.

Alexis nodded. 'We heard.' He paused. 'The prince lied to you. He sends apologies but he was trying to protect her.'

Johansen was suddenly very alert. Across the table, Grenner pushed his chair back.

'What was the lie?' he asked.

'His wife wasn't ill. He was going to stay the night at the Seven Stars, but Anastasia told him he was in danger and he should leave.'

'So she was the person the cellarman heard leaving a few minutes later,' Grenner said. Alexis nodded.

Johansen absorbed the information, fitting it together. 'She wasn't an innocent,' he said, 'she knew what the Ulricans' plan was. But she couldn't go through with it. She may even have lit the fuse, knowing the prince had left. And they killed her for that.' He looked up at Alexis. 'When you learned the prince was seeing Anastasia you checked her background, had her followed, right?'

The bodyguard nodded. 'We didn't find any links to known troublemakers.'

'What other northerners did she meet regularly? Friends? Associates?'

'Her brother's in the city.'

'What does he do?' Grenner asked.

'He's a stonemason.'

Johansen exhaled sharply. 'Grenner,' he said, 'remember I said the dead girl reminded me of someone?'

'Yeah?'

'The stoneworkers' foreman in the Königplatz this morning.'

Grenner stared at him, horror across his face. No words were needed. They sprinted from the records room, out of the council building, heading towards the Königplatz.



IT WAS LATER than they had realised and the darkened streets were thronged with revellers. Johansen let Grenner take the lead, following the former Watch sergeant move through narrow alleys and through short-cuts, avoiding the crowds. After five years in Altdorf he still couldn't understand why people celebrated Hexensnacht, the night of witches. Back home in the south his family would be around the fire tonight, doors locked and windows shuttered. Bad things happened on Hexensnacht.

Above them the two moons sat, one thin and one fat in a sky that flashed with bursts from fireworks, their explosions echoing off the buildings. It was not a good omen. As he ran, Johansen clenched his fists and made a silent prayer to Sigmar that he was wrong.

They burst into the Königplatz. The square was a sea of people and movement, lit by flickering braziers on poles. Johansen leaped onto a market-barrow to scan the crowd.

'The statues,' he shouted to Grenner over the hubbub, and began pushing his way to where he had seen the work-crew. They had been digging a trench, he recalled, deep enough for several barrels.

A knot of merrymaking students blocked his way. 'Clear a path! Imperial officers!' he bellowed, shoving through them. Ahead a red-haired figure turned sharply, slapped someone on the shoulder and raced away through the crowd, towards the base of the statue of Sigmar. Johansen felt a rising dread, and gave chase. They'd spent the day assuming an Elector was in danger. They hadn't thought about symbols of the Empire.

If the Ulricans had buried gunpowder, he thought, there would be a way of lighting it, some kind of fuse. As if on cue a firework went off behind him, throwing colours over the crowd. The red-headed man ducked between the bases of the outermost statues. It was darker in there and the crowd was thinner. Johansen saw Grenner to his left and gestured towards the maze of stonework. Grenner nodded. That was all the plan they needed: they knew how each other worked.

Johansen drew his hand-crossbow from its holster and stepped into the shadows, heading for the statue of Sigmar. He surprised an entwined couple between the

feet of the Empress Magritta, and sent a black-lotus peddler scurrying away from under Ludwig the Fat. Around the plinth of Leopold I, he could see where the Ulricans had been working that morning. Above, Sigmar's mighty hammer eclipsed the moons, and in its shadow he could see the red-haired man kneeling on freshly laid paving-stones, crouched over something. A spark. It was a tinderbox.

Johansen knew he was out of time. He rushed forward, his crossbow raised, shouting, 'Drop it!'

The man didn't turn as he'd hoped, but crouched lower, blowing on something that glowed. Johansen charged in, firing as he ran. The bolt hit the Ulrican in the arm and the tinderbox went flying. The man twisted, his face maddened with rage, and Johansen kicked him in the teeth. He went backwards, his skull hitting the base of the statue with a crack.

Johansen's eyes searched the ground. A white cord lay between two flagstones, one end raised and singed. He grabbed it, pulling it with both hands. It came free, about three feet of fuse. He dangled it in front of the man's eyes.

'Happy Hexensnacht,' he said.

The man grinned through broken teeth and raised something in one hand, smashing it down onto the stones. Shards of clay splintered and a liquid spread, covering the ground, seeping between the flagstones into the soil below. Johansen punched the Ulrican in the side of the head, then dipped a finger and smelled it. Oil.

'Johansen!' Grenner yelled and he jerked his head up. A man was running out of the shadows, carrying a torch. It was the man the Ulrican had slapped in the crowd. A back-up. From the other direction Grenner's throwing knife spun and sunk into the new man's chest, a second into his eye. He fell. The torch went up, curving a bright path towards Johansen.

He jumped to catch it, and his foot slipped on the oil. It bounced through his hands and hit the flagstones. The oil burst into flames.

He stared for an instant.

'Run!' Grenner was bellowing. 'Run!'

He ran, roaring warnings, grabbing people and pushing them ahead of him. As he ran past the Empress and out into the crowd, he thought he might be safe.

Then the world picked him up and flung him across the square, filling his senses with bright loud disaster. He ducked and rolled, bruised and breathless, clambering back onto his feet, running through the panicked, screaming crowd to get away. There was a second explosion. People were knocking each other down, trampling over bodies, desperate to get away.

The statues were falling like trees in a gale, crashing into each other. Stone limbs dropped, torsos cracked, heads fell and exploded. Leopold collapsed into the Empress Magritta, her hollow bronze frame booming like a bell across the stampede in the square. She crumpled down into the crowd, crushing – Johansen didn't want to think how many people. He could see bodies impaled on the spikes of her crown. He felt sick.

Above the mayhem, the mighty figure of Sigmar stood firm, warhammer raised against the sky, the symbol of the Empire. Johansen, swept away by the crowd, tried to keep his eyes on it. Could it have survived the blast? Would it stand? Then he saw the first crack appear in its right leg. Pieces of stone fell. The crack grew. The leg shattered. The stone warhammer moved against the sky, slowly but unstoppably.

Johansen watched, not caring about the people streaming and screaming past him, as the first emperor fell from his plinth like a god falling from the heavens, smashing its hundred-foot length across the flagstones and crowds of the Königplatz, splintering into uncountable pieces. The head of the warhammer, ten feet across and solid granite, bounced once, rolled and crashed into the Black Goat Inn. Beams fell, tiles cascaded off the roof into the crowd below, and part of the front wall collapsed.

Johansen felt a hand grip his forearm and turned to see Grenner. His partner's face was gaunt and covered in dust, his clothes torn, his face bleeding where it had been cut by flying stones. They stared at each other and at the devastation around them. Grenner raised an arm and pointed at the wreckage of the inn.

'You know,' he shouted above the tumult and chaos, 'that's hurt your chances of getting a snog tonight.'

Johansen almost hit him. Instead after a second he said, 'Give me your cloak.' Grenner passed it and Johansen tore it into

strips. Together they knelt and began bandaging the wounded.



GET SOME SLEEP,' Hoffmann said. It was four hours later. Altdorf was in shock. The Königplatz lay in chaos, corpses still strewn amidst the rubble of two thousand years of history, everything covered with a layer of powdered stone, made ghostly by the flames of a hundred torches, lighting the rescuers' efforts to find more wounded. The temples and hospices were full, and the cold stone slabs in the temples of Mórr too. Messengers had already ridden out from the city to carry the news across the Empire, like a rock dropped in a frozen pond, the news fracturing and rippling out across the land.

That, Johansen thought, was what the Ulricans had wanted, what they were prepared to give their lives to achieve. In the north of the Empire, in Ostland and beyond, the fall of Sigmar would be a rallying-cry. Come the spring, there might even be civil war.

He sat in Hoffmann's office, drinking hot spiced wine, Grenner beside him. The three had spent the night lifting rocks, carrying bodies and comforting the wounded and the grieving until they were utterly exhausted. Logically, he thought, they should have been searching for the other Ulricans. But this was more important.

'Sorry we didn't stop them, sir,' he said for the fifth time. Across the room, Hoffmann shook his head. The leather of his chair creaked with the movement.

'Not your fault. You did everything you could. We didn't have the manpower, it was as simple as that.' He looked contemplative. 'Get some sleep.'

'Shouldn't we find the rest of them, sir?'

'They're probably miles outside the city by now,' Hoffmann said, 'heading north. But don't forget the two of you are on duty at seven bells.'

'You're bloody joking,' Grenner blurted out.

'I'll overlook that insolence, Grenner, given the circumstances. Hexenstag dawn: the Emperor will be at the cathedral service for the blessing of the new year. We attend him.

Plain clothes, not uniform. And shave, for Sigmar's sake.'

'Won't it be cancelled?' Grenner asked. 'Under the circumstances?'

Hoffmann shook his head. 'The Emperor's determined to show his people that Sigmar's Empire and its faith are still strong – and to mourn the dead as well. He's adamant. He's instructed all the Electors in Altdorf to be there too.'

'Oh Sigmar,' Johansen said quietly.

'What, Johansen?' Hoffmann asked.

'Don't you see?' His mind was exhausted; perhaps that was how he could understand the Ulrican fanatics, the way they thought, the depths of their madness and the extremes they'd go to. He remembered the eyes of the red-haired mason, a man who knew he was going to die and didn't care. 'It's not over. The cathedral with the Emperor and the Electors, all the nobility of Altdorf... that's the next target. They're not settling for sending a signal, they want to start the war. Today.'

Hoffmann stared at him. 'Sigmar's balls, man, didn't they use all their gunpowder this evening?'

'No.' His neck ached. 'The crater in the Königplatz wasn't deep enough. I reckon they've got four or five hundred pounds left.'

Hoffmann stared across the dark room. 'An hour's sleep,' he said. 'No more. Then we search the cathedral from top to bottom.'



SOMETHING CLANGED, and Grenner was instantly awake. It knelled again and he realised what he was hearing: the great bell of the cathedral, ringing to summon the faithful to worship. Light streamed through the windows. He threw off his blanket and shook Johansen on the next bed.

'We've overslept! We've bloody overslept!'

Johansen was alert in a second. 'What happened to Hoffmann? He was going to wake us.'

'No idea.'

Johansen began throwing on his torn and filthy clothes. 'You know he's an Ulrican?'

'Who?'

'Hoffmann.'

'What are you saying?' Grenner stared at him.

'Nothing. Just an observation.'

'I hope you're right.' They rushed downstairs and out into the street. Nobody turned to look at them: there were too many ragged, haggard people in the city that morning. Thin grey dust coated everything. Two horses stood at a hitching-post outside a building opposite. Grenner caught Johansen's eye. A moment later they were on horseback, galloping towards the great cathedral of Sigmar.

'How would they have got barrels of gunpowder into the cathedral?' Grenner shouted above the clatter of hoofs on cobbles.

Johansen gestured with one hand. 'Bribery. Concealment. The powder may not be in barrels any more. Where the hell's Hoffmann?'

'How should I know?'

Ahead, they could see a crowd around the cathedral's high doors. Many people had come to worship alongside the Empire's greatest citizens today, to mourn loved ones, or ask for divine retribution on their killers. Grenner could see armoured guards by the doors, swords drawn.

'Stop,' he shouted. Johansen reined in his horse.

'Why?' he said.

'We need to think about this.'

'Every second counts.'

'They're not going to let us into the cathedral looking like this.' He paused. How much gunpowder did you say the Ulricans had left? Enough to bring down the building?'

'Enough to make a hole in it, maybe.'

'They want more than that.' Grenner grimaced, thinking. 'Maybe they're going to crash a Bretonnian wineseller's cart stuffed with gunpowder through the doors and blow themselves up.'

'Not funny.'

'I wasn't joking.' Grenner wiped his brow and stared up at the huge building, its buttresses rearing up into the sky around the peaked slates of the pitched roof. Between their stone arms, hanging over the high crenellated wall around the top of the building, a scarlet flag was blowing in the wind.

'What would five hundred pounds of gunpowder do to the roof?' he asked.

Johansen furrowed his brow. 'You could collapse the whole thing.' He raised an eyebrow. 'Why do you think they're up there?'

Grenner pointed at the flag that had caught his eye. 'Recognise that?'

'No.'

'You should pay more attention to fashion. That's Hoffmann's cloak.'

Johansen was silent for a second. Then: 'How do we get up there?'

Grenner grinned. 'Follow my lead.' He dug his heels into his horse and galloped down the street, heading for the crowd around the cathedral doors, Johansen hard on his heels. Heads turned as people heard their approaching hoofbeats, there were shouts, and a path opened. Grenner rode down it, heading for the doorway, holding his reins tight to keep the horse straight.

The guards tried to block them with their swords but they weren't fast enough and their blades weren't long enough: Grenner thanked the gods that they hadn't been pikemen. He flashed past them and into the cathedral's antechamber, glanced back to check Johansen was still behind him, then crouched low as the horse plunged through the smaller arch into the vaulted expanse of the long nave.

People in the pews either side leaped to their feet as the two horses galloped down the cathedral's central aisle. There were shouts of surprise and anger. Grenner ignored them. He knew a stairway in the south-east transept; it led up past the gallery where the Elector Counts sat to watch the service, then spiralled upwards to the roof. That was their way up.

He galloped past the choir. Almost there. People behind them were chasing on foot, but he was well ahead of them. The horse cantered into the shadows of the transept, Grenner leaped from its saddle, drew his sword and ran to the stairs, taking them three at a time. Johansen was right behind him.

A wall of armed men blocked their way.

Oh Sigmar, he thought. The Electors' guards. There was no way through. He twisted round, to see more soldiers behind him. No way out either. Trapped.

There was a strange hush in the cathedral at this invasion of a holy place. Off to one side Grenner could see the open gallery where the Electors were seated. He

INFERNO!

recognised faces among them. He'd saved some of their lives, but they wouldn't know him.

No, he thought, one would. Grand Prince Valmir von Raukov, Elector Count of Ostland.

'Prince Valmir,' he shouted. 'The men who killed Anastasia are on the roof.'

The Elector's head jerked up and he stared at the Palisades officers as if woken from a dream. He looked surprised and alarmed. Startled, Grenner thought, to hear his mistress's name echo across the cathedral. It was a risk. If the prince was a typical cold-blooded noble he could ignore them and the guards would cut them down. But if, as Grenner had guessed, he had really loved the girl...

The prince stood. 'Let them pass,' he said.

The guards moved aside. Grenner pushed between them and headed up. Behind him, Johansen paused to take a loaded crossbow from one of the soldiers. 'I'll borrow that,' he said, and followed his partner.



THE DOOR AT the top of the stairs was closed. Grenner shoulder-charged it and it flew open with a crash. Outside, in the narrow trough between the low wall of battlements and the steep pitch of the roof, three men looked up. One grabbed for a lit lantern, one for a bow, and one did not move because he was bound hand and foot, gagged and leant against the wall with his cloak flapping in the cold wind. Hoffmann.

Grenner dived to one side. Behind him, Johansen raised his borrowed weapon and shot the other Bowman in the head. He fell.

The second man, dark and heavily built, ducked behind Hoffmann, wrapping an arm round his neck, using him as a shield. 'You cannot win,' he shouted. 'This is Ulric's year! The false god Sigmar has been destroyed and his temple and priests shall perish too! It is ordained!' His voice had a northern accent and the hectoring tone of a true believer.

'Morning, sir,' Johansen said, looking at the network of oil-soaked cords running over the roof, doubtless leading to caches of gunpowder. Grenner had been right: they

were planning to bring the roof down on the worshippers below.

'Don't move, or the nobleman dies!' the Ulrican shouted, pulling Hoffmann with him. The fuses were joined into a single twist of cord, Johansen saw. So they were all linked. Any fuse lit would ignite the others. Thirty feet away the Ulrican was moving towards the cords, lantern in one hand, Hoffmann in the other.

Johansen slowly raised his hands. 'Don't kill the nobleman,' he said.

'It'd look bad on our records if you did,' said Grenner from behind him. 'Sorry about this, sir.' A throwing-knife flashed from his hand and embedded itself in Hoffmann's thigh. The general's leg gave way and he collapsed. Johansen was already drawing his small crossbow from its shoulder-holster and firing, running forwards.

The Ulrican took the bolt in the temple and fell, throwing the lantern at the cords. It struck the stonework of the gutter at an angle and rolled, the oil inside blazing up.

Johansen sprinted and kicked it as hard as he could, away from the fuses. Glass shattered and glistening liquid sprayed out as the lantern soared away over the battlements and down into the city below. He didn't hear a crash.

He turned. Grenner was crouched beside Hoffmann, cutting his bonds. Johansen made an abrupt gesture and Grenner stopped.

'What?'

'Remember last night?'

Grenner's eyes widened. 'Back-up guy.'

'Where?' There was no sign of anyone else. Johansen took a few paces, checking around the exit to the stairway.

There was a scream from the top of the roof and a figure hurtled down the steep slope full-tilt, a lantern in one hand, a sword in the other.

The sword slashed at Johansen's arm. He dodged sideways, grabbing for the man's jerkin, lifting him as he ran, using his momentum to throw him over the wall.

The man screamed all the way down.



'I CAN'T BELIEVE Hoffmann went to start the search on his own,' Grenner said as they walked away from the cathedral, leaving the oblivious crowds behind them. 'He must have known the Ulricans would have left people on guard.'

'Why didn't they kill him when they caught him?'

'They wanted him to distract people like us. They only needed a few seconds.'

'They almost got them.' Johansen looked around. 'Where are you taking me?'

'Since the Black Goat is out of commission,' Grenner said, 'I thought I'd treat you to Hexenstag breakfast at a place I know by the west gate.'

'I'd rather have a wash and get some sleep.'

'You'll sleep better with a full stomach.' Grenner paused. 'Have you noticed that nobody thanked us?'

'Hoffmann did.'

'Hoffmann is deducting his surgeon's bill from my wages. That's hardly thanks.'

There was silence as the two men walked on through the city. Some things didn't need to be said out loud. The watery sun was warm on their skin and the light breeze helped them forget how dirty and tired they both were.

There was a queue of carts, wagons and pedestrians at the west gate, waiting to leave the city. Already security had been tightened after the Königplatz explosion, and every guard wanted to be seen doing his job. Grenner felt Johansen's elbow dig into his ribs and looked up. His partner was pointing at a familiar cart in the queue. 'You owe someone an apology,' he said.

Grenner gave him a long look, then sighed and walked up to the cart, its cargo of wide barrels stacked upright and roped together for travel. He reached up a hand in greeting.

'It is Hexenstag morning, a time of goodwill, monsieur,' he said, 'and I owe you an apology.'

The Bretonnian wineseller in the driver's seat looked startled and scared. He groped for his reins to jolt his horses into motion. Grenner stepped back, raising his hands in appeasement.

'We were looking for the men who caused the explosion last night. I thought you might be involved. I was wrong. So,' he added, 'you're leaving Altdorf.'

The short man nodded sourly. 'Zis city, she is not friendly to strangers, you know? And zis thing last night, very bad. I go home.'

'Did you sell your wine in the end?'

The Bretonnian nodded. 'Oui. In the end.'

'Well, that's something. Travel safely.' Grenner nodded farewell and walked away from the cart and back to Johansen.

'Stop looking so smug,' he said.

Johansen grinned. "Hexenstag morning, a time of goodwill," he said. 'You hate admitting you're wrong, that's your problem. You should keep some goodwill in your heart the rest of the... What?'

Grenner was staring at the back of the Bretonnian's head. 'If he's sold his wine,' he said, 'why's he still got the barrels on his cart?'

Johansen turned to look. 'I don't know,' he said. 'Do you want to ask?'

'You do it.'

The queue of carts had moved and the Bretonnian was almost at the gatehouse. Grenner waited as Johansen walked up to the cart, then went to its rear, climbed up and stood between the upright casks. He drew his sword, turned it and smashed the hilt down on the lid. It cracked and splintered. A female face, gagged and bound, terrified, streaked with tears, stared up at him from inside. The Bretonnian leaped from his seat and ran for the gate, but the guards were ready for him. They caught him, holding his arms as he struggled and hissed.

Five barrels on the cart. Five missing women. And he'd known there had been something strange about the wineseller from the moment he'd met him. Johansen hadn't believed him, but he'd known. The man was a kidnapper, a slaver or something worse.

From the ground, Johansen looked up at him. 'Result?'

Grenner nodded. 'Happy Hexenstag,' he said. He stared up at the sun, letting its warmth massage the weariness from his body. 'The nights start getting shorter now.'

'They'll get longer again soon enough.'

'I know. So enjoy them while you can.' He tugged the rest of the barrel lid away and reached in to help the woman inside to her feet. 'I know you're not much use at handling women, but I could use some help here.'

They set to work. *



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